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An Ally's Home, Taiwan's De-Facto Embassy: Moïse's Assassins Captured in Bizarre Places
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

In the two-day manhunt after the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, Haitian National Police (PNH) apprehended 19 suspects, including 17 Colombians and two Haitian-Americans. All of the men were found hiding out inside the capital city of Port-au-Prince and in places that raise more questions than they answer.

The PNH said Thursday that the hit squad, which killed Moïse and injured his wife, Martine, at their home in a Port-au-Prince suburb early Wednesday morning, had [consisted of 28 "foreigners."](#) the other nine were killed in a shootout with police, all of them reported to be Colombian. They are still on the trail of the masterminds of the operation, with a two-week [state of emergency](#) declared on Wednesday giving them sweeping powers to search homes, blockade roads, and other sundry necessary measures to bring the perpetrators to justice. However, the men were found in different groups and in strange locations.

Taiwanese De-Facto Embassy

The Embassy of the partially-recognized Republic of China (Taiwan) to Haiti reported Friday morning that 11 of the men had been apprehended inside the diplomatic compound in the suburb of Pétion-Ville, barely a mile from the Pelerin 5 neighborhood where Moïse's house is located.

"In the early morning of July 8, security personnel at the embassy discovered a group of fully armed, suspicious-looking individuals breaking through the security perimeter and entering the courtyard. The security company immediately made emergency calls to notify embassy staff as well as the Haiti police," Joanne Ou, a spokesperson for the embassy, [said in a statement](#). She added that the facility had been closed due to the lockdown, so it was almost deserted.

"The Haiti police commenced an operation at around 4 pm on July 8, arresting 11 armed suspects. The operation went smoothly, and the suspects did not resist arrest," Ou added. Haiti is one of just a handful of nations that continue to recognize Taiwan - formally the Republic of China - as the legitimate government of China. The rest of the world's nations instead recognize the People's Republic of China, the government established in 1949 in Beijing after the communist Red Army was victorious in the civil war and captured all of the mainland. The US switched its recognition in the 1970s, but retains an open but informal relationship with Taipei, and pressures small nations like Haiti to continue to give Taiwan some diplomatic recognition.

Accordingly, Taipei has worked to court Port-au-Prince's continued friendship, with Moïse and President Tsai Ing-Wen [visiting each other's](#) nations in 2019 and Tsai pledging support for infrastructure projects in Haiti.

House Connected to Moïse's Ally

The two American mercenaries, James Solages, 35, and Joseph Vincent, 55, were arrested with several others at a house owned by Magalie Habitant, a major figure in Moïse's Tet Kale party. She claimed that the house, located in Thomassin, about a mile from Moïse's Pelerin home but in the opposite direction from the embassy, was not hers.

"I have nothing to do with this house that I left for three months," Habitant told reporters. "I had hired it from a lawyer."

Habitant was appointed by Moïse to head the Metropolitan Solid Waste Collection Service (SMCRS) in 2017, but was [unceremoniously ejected](#) from the position the following year when the bureau was rolled into a larger National Service for the Management of Solid Residues (SNGRS).

Two months ago, [Habitant was accused](#) of "mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds" while serving as SMCRS chief in an investigation by La Fondasyon Je Klere (FJKL), a Haitian civil watchdog group. The group described the agency under her tenure as having been run "like a private shop, in violation of elementary management rules, of the law on public accounting and the decree on the preparation of finance laws," and tracked unexplained expenditures of 11,259,000 Haitian gourdes (\$118,854), among various other unexplained expenses.

Habitant has been accused of having connections to other bands of mercenaries, as well. [In February 2019](#), a Ford Ranger pickup truck in which seven heavily-armed mercenaries were arrested belonged to her, and she was [subsequently indicted](#) for suspected complicity in helping them to enter the country. The incident occurred amid the mass protests provoked by a Senate probe that had revealed embezzlement of [the PetroCaribe program](#), by which Venezuela gave Haiti oil for its own use and to sell, allowing the impoverished country to pocket the profits as a valuable source of national income.

Then in March 2021, questions were again raised when she mysteriously served as the pickup driver for three hostages released by another group of mercenaries. She told Port-au-Prince [radio station Magik9](#) that a "concerned body" had asked her to pick the men up, saying it was "of the utmost importance to the country."

The presence of mercenaries and armed gangs was a staple of Moïse's presidency, and they have been employed both against protesters and ransacked communities of their own volition, killing, kidnapping and displacing thousands of residents in fights over territory with rival gangs. How The Commando Arrived

At a news conference in Bogota, Colombia, on Friday, National Police director Gen. Jorge Luis [Vargas Valencia revealed](#) that the "recruitment, the gathering of these people" in the commando had been carried out by four different companies and trickled into Haiti in the days and weeks prior to the hit.

None of the Colombians' names have been revealed thus far, but Vargas said that two of the suspects had traveled to Haiti via Panama and the Dominican Republic, the latter of which shares the island of Hispaniola with Haiti; a second group of 11 men arrived in Haiti on July 4, also via DR.

Further, 13 of the 15 Colombians captured or killed by Haitian police had been identified as retired members of the Colombian military, ranging from the rank of lieutenant colonel to soldier, and had left the military within the last three years, according to the commander of Colombia's Armed Forces, Gen. Luis Fernando Navarro.

Often heavily trained by partnership programs with the United States, Colombian soldiers are popular hires for private security firms and mercenary outfits. It is notable that [video of the commando](#) assembling outside Moïse's home just before his death shows the men identifying themselves to Moïse's guards as agents of the US [Drug Enforcement Agency \(DEA\)](#), a federal law enforcement agency that partners with the Colombian government to run counter-narcotics operations in the country. A highly militarized police force, the DEA also works with US Special Forces to [train Colombia's militarized](#) police.

Edmond Boccit, Haiti's ambassador to the US, dismissed the notion they could be DEA agents, [telling Sputnik](#) "they just wanted to mask the horrible act."

The two Americans, Solages and Vincent, had been in Haiti for some time.

According to the Associated Press, Solages previously worked as a bodyguard at the Canadian Embassy in Haiti while in the employ of a private contractor, and describes himself as a "certified diplomatic agent." He lives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

Magistrate Clement Noel told Port-au-Prince daily [La Nouvelliste](#) that Solages had said he found the job with the commando "on the internet" and had been living in Haiti for a month. Noel said Vincent had been in Haiti for six months, but previously lived in the Miami area.

The two men claimed to be [nothing but translators](#) for the commando, and told police that the mission was to arrest Moïse "within the framework of the execution of a mandate of an investigating judge and not to kill him," Noel told the paper.

Grappling With the Aftermath

After Moïse's death, his wife, Martine, who was badly wounded in the attack, was transported to Florida for treatment and was last reported to be in stable condition at a Miami hospital.

In the power vacuum, acting Prime Minister Claude Joseph declared himself the [country's interim ruler](#) and has been supported by the US, UN, and other international bodies. However, the day before his assassination, Moïse had appointed another man, neurosurgeon Ariel Henry, to succeed Joseph, but according to Boccit, Henry had no chance to organize a government by the time of the crisis. Friday evening, a third contender also emerged: Senate President [Joseph Lambert](#), appointed by the rump Senate composed of just 10 lawmakers.

Joseph has declared a two-week state of emergency and given police wide-ranging powers to hunt down the president's assassins. On Friday afternoon, Elections Minister Mathias Pierre said Joseph's government had [asked the US to deploy](#) as many as 500 troops to Haiti to protect the country's essential infrastructure, such as ports and gas facilities, from "urban terrorists" and "potential mercenaries." However, on Friday evening, Reuters reported that a senior US official had said the country had declined to send troops for the moment.

The US is [also sending agents](#) from the FBI and Department of Homeland Security to the country to buttress the PNH, along with \$5 million toward the PNH budget, the White House has revealed.

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US to Send Senior FBI, DHS Officials to Haiti to Investigate President Moïse Assassination
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

The White House said on Friday it would be dispatching federal police officers from the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to Haiti in the aftermath of the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse, slain in his home by a hit squad early Wednesday morning.

"In response to the Haitian request for security and investigative assistance, we will be sending senior FBI and DHS officials to Port-au-Prince as soon as possible to assess the situation and how we may be able to assist," White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday. Psaki also revealed the US was providing \$5 million to the Haitian National Police (PNH) "to work with communities to resist gangs."

"Strengthening Haiti's law enforcement capacity is a key US priority - was before the assassination a few days ago, continues to be," she added, "and the US Department of State's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs provides assistance directly to the Haitian National Police."

Psaki added that Haiti was one of the nations to which the US would be donating COVID-19 vaccines, saying they could begin being delivered "as early as next week." Haiti has no state vaccination plan. Last month, 130,000 doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine supplied by the COVAX partnership [were indefinitely delayed](#) due to manufacturing issues in India. Haiti has a population of 11 million.

The PNH said Thursday it had [captured or killed](#) all of the 28-man commando that stormed Moïse's house in a Port-au-Prince suburb early Wednesday morning, killing him and wounding his wife, Martine. Two of the men were Americans and 26 were Colombians, with 17 of them believed to be ex-military. The captured [Americans have claimed](#) they were simply translators and that the commando intended to capture, not kill the 53-year-old president. However, his [body was mutilated](#) by more than a dozen bullets, according to eyewitnesses.

Psaki said Friday that the investigation of the two Americans "is not going to impact the assistance we're providing" to Haiti.

According to Reuters, Edmond Bocchit, Haiti's ambassador to the US, asked the US in a Wednesday letter to US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to impose sanctions on all involved in Moïse's assassination sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act, a 2016 law used to censure human rights offenders by blocking their access to the United States and seizing their assets. Since Moïse's murder, acting Prime Minister Claude Joseph, a Moïse appointee, has assumed de facto control of the country and is recognized in that role by the United Nations and United States, which have both urged the need for stability. However, there are other contenders for the position, [including Ariel Henry](#), a neurosurgeon who Moïse had named to succeed Joseph as prime minister just hours before the assassination, but who had not yet formed a new government. Joseph on Wednesday declared a two-week [state of emergency](#) that gave police wide-ranging powers to hunt down the perpetrators and the masterminds of the assassination. Bocchit [told France 24](#) on Thursday that the PNH was "overwhelmed and facing well-armed gangs" and welcomed any assistance that would allow the restoration of orderly life. However, he also said that the US and Haiti had "not been discussing" the deployment of US forces to the country, which is about 600 miles southeast of Florida.

"Our relationship with the UN has been tarnished," he added, referring to the 2010 [outbreak of cholera](#) that killed more than 10,000 Haitians. The outbreak was traced to UN peacekeepers

deployed to the country in the aftermath of the catastrophic earthquake that killed more than 230,000 Haitians. "But at the same time, we understand that many countries want to help. Now we need help: it's very important to say that, we cannot hide it, because the National Police in itself cannot - and the armed forces we have ... can help the National Police but it's not enough. Therefore, it's very important to assess the situation and see what would be best suited for the actual reality."

The US has repeatedly intervened in Haiti with military forces, including a 19-year occupation from 1915 to 1934, and carried out or facilitated several coups d'etat of popular leaders who threatened US interests in the country. Washington's backing of Moïse's claim earlier this year that his presidential term had another year left, in contrast to a high court ruling that his term had expired, brought mass protests demanding the US end its support for him and not intervene in Haitian affairs.

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Rejecting UN-Approved Leader, Haiti's Senate Proclaims Joseph Lambert as Interim President - Report

by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Haiti's Senate, the only remaining body of elected officials in the country's government, voted on Friday to elect Senate President Joseph Lambert as the country's interim leader - a direct challenge to acting Prime Minister Claude Joseph, who has declared himself the leader and has the backing of the United States and United Nations.

"Joseph Lambert, elected by the people as Senator of the Republic, is chosen by his peers to fulfill the function of Provisional President of the Republic of Haiti until the entry into office of Parliament, the second Monday in January 2022, until a new president is elected on February 7, 2022," the senators declared.

They tasked him with creating a "government of national agreement" and a provisional electoral council within 15 days, in pursuit of the "restoration of security and the holding of credible elections in the shortest reasonable time."

According to [Haitian news outlet Juno7](#), eight senators voted for the measure and two abstained. The Senate has 20 empty seats at present due to a series of interrupted elections that resulted in two cadres of senators being elected - and thus also departing - at once, with former Haitian President Jovenel Moïse [failing to organize](#) elections to replace them in January 2020.

The parliament's lower house, the Chamber of Deputies, similarly saw its lawmakers' terms expire in January without any new replacements, leaving just Moïse and a handful of senators as the only elected officials in the national government.

Lambert's claim to power means there are now three contenders for supreme power in the Caribbean nation in the aftermath of the assassination of Moïse on Wednesday by a commando of 28 gunmen.

Claude Joseph was appointed by Moïse in April to be the country's acting Prime Minister due to the country's nonexistent parliament being unable to form one after Joseph Jouthe resigned. He was previously the country's Foreign Minister. However, on July 6, just a day before Moise was killed, he [appointed Ariel Henry](#) to succeed Joseph in the role. A neurosurgeon who served as Minister of Interior, Labor, and Social Affairs during the administration of Moise's predecessor, Michel Martelly, Joseph led the response to the country's cholera outbreak in 2010, which was caused by United Nations troops sent after the catastrophic earthquake in January of that year. Many claim that Joseph's declaration assuming power is unconstitutional, but he has the backing of the US and UN, who have said they prize stability above all else. Edmond Bocchit, Haiti's ambassador to the US, [told France 24](#) on Thursday that Henry had not had time to form a new government by the time Moise was killed, which is why Joseph has remained in power. "Claude Joseph is not Prime Minister, he is part of my government," Henry said on Friday, according to [La Nouvelliste](#).

Helen La Lime, the United Nations' special envoy for Haiti, [said on Thursday](#) that Joseph would lead the country until new elections had been organized, which are planned for September and November.

Meanwhile, Claude Joseph's government has requested the United States and United Nations [dispatch troops](#) to Haiti to defend key infrastructure from mercenaries. However, according to Reuters, Washington has declined the request.

"We definitely need assistance and we've asked our international partners for help," Joseph told [the Associated Press](#). "We believe our partners can assist the national police in resolving the situation."

The US has [also sent FBI](#) and Department of Homeland Security officials to the country to assist the National Police (PNH), and provided \$5 million towards the PNH's budget.

After Moise was killed, Joseph declared a "state of siege" and gave the police new powers to hunt down the president's killers. As of Friday evening, the PNH had [reported the arrests](#) of 19 members of the commando, 17 of whom were Colombians and 2 of whom were Americans of Haitian descent. However, they said at least seven others had been killed and even more remained at large.

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Haiti's Interim Gov Reportedly Requests Troop Deployments by US, UN to Ensure Country's Security
by [Morgan Artyukhina](#)

Mathias Pierre, Haiti's minister of elections, announced Friday that the Haitian government had requested the US to deploy troops to the island nation to protect key infrastructure after the Biden administration offered the country aid in the wake of the assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moïse earlier this week.

Earlier, both US and Haitian officials told reporters they could not confirm whether such a request had been made or not, but on Friday afternoon Pierre told the [New York Times](#) that "urban terrorists" like those who shot the president to death in his home on Wednesday posed a continuing danger to civil assets.

"The group that financed the mercenaries want to create chaos in the country," he said.

"Attacking the gas reserves and airport might be part of the plan."

The troops would also be asked to protect Haiti's port, airport, and energy facilities.

Pierre later told CNN the request was for a limited number of troops - approximately 500.

The Pentagon declined to comment on the request, instead directing Sputnik to the Department of State, which has not answered a request for comment. A senior US official told Reuters "there are no plans to provide US military assistance at this time."

Reuters also revealed on Friday that a letter from Haiti to the United Nations requested a deployment of international troops "to support the efforts of the national police aiming to restablish security and public order in the whole territory," including defending infrastructure.

The letter is dated July 7 - the day Moïse was killed.

On Thursday, Edmond Bocchit, Haiti's ambassador to the US, [told France 24](#) that that the Haitian National Police (PNH) had been "overwhelmed and facing well-armed gangs" and welcomed any assistance that would allow the restoration of orderly life.

"Now we need help: it's very important to say that, we cannot hide it," Bocchit said. However, he added that they had "not been discussing" the deployment of US forces to the country, which is about 600 miles southeast of Florida.

Earlier on Friday, White House Press Secretary Jen [Psaki told reporters](#) at a regular briefing that the US was dispatching federal officers from the FBI and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to Haiti "in response to a specific request," as well as \$5 million for the PNH.

The PNH said Friday they had captured 19 members of the 28-man commando that assaulted Moïse's house posing as US Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) officers. Two of the men were Americans and 17 were Colombians; the rest of the commando had been killed in a shootout.

However, it has since said that it is in pursuit of six more people.

Acting Prime Minister Claude Joseph has declared himself to be the country's interim ruler until elections can be organized, which are expected to occur in September and November.

However, some Haitians have not backed him because the day before his death, Moïse appointed Ariel Henry, a neurosurgeon, to replace him. The US, United Nations, and other international bodies have recognized Joseph's claim, which Bocchit explained was due to Henry not having had time to organize a new government.

Joseph has enacted a two-week state of emergency and given police wide-ranging powers to track down Moïse's killers.

In the US press, the editorial boards of several major newspapers have penned pro-interventionist articles in recent days.

The [Washington Post's](#) editorial board wrote on Wednesday evening that "Haiti needs swift and muscular international intervention," arguing that "the hard truth, at this point, is that organizing them and ensuring security through a campaign and polling, with no one in charge, may be all but impossible."

On Thursday, the [Miami Herald's](#) editors argued the US must "get off the sidelines and act" because of the precarious mandate given to Joseph, the lack of a sitting parliament, and the recent untimely death of the chief of the Supreme Court from COVID-19.

"All of this adds up to one thing: The United States, which has been content to stay mostly quiet on Haiti in both the Trump administration and the Biden administration, will have to get off the sidelines - immediately," the Herald wrote.

The US has a long history of military interventions in Haiti, including a 19-year military occupation and puppet government from 1915 to 1934 which similarly followed the killing of a Haitian head of state - President Vilbrun Guillaume Sam - and which resulted in the theft of Haiti's entire national gold reserve and the deaths of 15,000 Haitians under the regime. More recently, US Marines were dispatched in 2004 in what amounted to a coup d'etat that removed leftist President Jean-Bertrand Aristide from office.

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Kabul Calls on Russia, India, China to Help Fight Terrorism in Afghanistan
by [Evan Craighead](#)

As the US-led coalition nears the September 11 deadline for its pull-out from Afghanistan, the Taliban reportedly seized control of some 85% of territory within the country, according to a Friday statement issued by the militant group. The Taliban's issuance has been dismissed as propaganda by some.

Afghan National Security Adviser Hamdullah Mohib announced on Friday that Afghanistan welcomes any technical, anti-terrorism operation support from external partners, including the militaries of Russia, China and India.

However, any external assistance should not interfere with internal Afghan government matters, Mohib emphasized.

"We do not need to replace one superpower with another, peace and stability are possible only in the case of cooperation with everyone in the region and beyond, but we call on external partners to help our defense and security forces fight terrorism, for which they are intended, and not interfere in our internal affairs," the Afghan national security adviser said.

"We welcome technical support from all external partners, of course, from China, India and Russia."

Mohib went on to assert Afghan authorities have recognized the Taliban's right to exist as a legitimate political force, not a "monopoly," alongside other groups within Afghanistan.

The Afghan government's pleas come alongside the Taliban's celebration of allegedly claiming 85% of territory in Afghanistan.

Speaking during a Friday news conference in Moscow, Russia, Taliban official Shahabuddin Delawar declared "you and the entire world community have probably [recently learned that 85%](#) of the territory of Afghanistan has come under the control."

Friday alone, members of the movement overtook the border town of Islam Qala, and the [Abu Nasa Farahi checkpoint](#) - both key territories along the Afghan-Iranian border.

Delawar also vowed to take operational measures to ensure Daesh* does not re-emerge in Afghanistan.

[A number of military experts](#) have argued that a less rushed pullout by US President Joe Biden and his administration could have curbed the Taliban's now-actively growing influence in the region.

US Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski, a former analyst for the US Department of Defense, told Sputnik it was unlikely that Afghanistan's existing government would survive the next several months.

"Although there should be a rush by select political groups and individuals to join or buy in politically with the controlling Taliban, and some Kabul former US allies could remain and be useful to the Taliban, as it seeks to end the civil war and get on with an economic recovery and peace," Kwiatkowski qualified.

According to the US intelligence community, Afghanistan will collapse within six months of the US-led coalition's withdrawal. Such estimates have led other countries, and even Americans, to question the abrupt timeline of Biden's pullout.

"The situation is rapidly deteriorating," announced the Russian Embassy in Washington, DC, speaking of stability within the region. "We attribute it to the hasty pull-out of the U.S. and other NATO countries' troops."

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Rupert Murdoch Directed Fox News to Project Biden's Narrow Arizona Win Over Trump, Wolff Claims

by [Evan Craighead](#)

Voters in the US state of Arizona - a historically Republican-majority state - narrowly selected then-Democratic presidential nominee Joe Biden (49.4% of popular vote) over then-US President Donald Trump (49.1% of popular vote), during the 2020 US election. The margin of less than 11,000 votes prompted calls for an audit of Arizona's results.

Rupert Murdoch, founder and chairman of global media holding company News Corp, verbally approved Fox News' early call to project Biden as victorious amid the narrow Arizona popular vote, according to [Insider's newly-obtained excerpt](#) from Michael Wolff's "Landslide: The Final Days of the Trump Presidency."

According to the journalist, who is publishing his third book on Trump, Murdoch pulled the trigger during an apparently casual phone call with his son, Fox Corp. Chief Executive Officer Lachlan Murdoch.

"Lachlan got his father on the phone to ask if he wanted to make the early call. His father, with signature grunt, assented, adding, 'F**k him,'" Wolff wrote in his book.

Wolff detailed that as Fox News prepared the report, Fox News anchor Bill Hemmer phoned Jason Miller, Trump's social media strategist at the time, to provide 45's administration with a heads up, Wolff claimed.

"Miller involuntarily rose from his seat. 'What the f*ck?' he said out loud, looking around and seeing the still-merry and untroubled faces in the Map Room" of Trump campaign staffers and insiders who believed they were on the fast-track to reelection," the journalist wrote.

Fox was notably the first major network to project Biden as the winner in Arizona.

Later Friday, a Fox News spokesperson rejected Wolff's work as a "completely false" series of events, arguing that electoral projections would not be left up to Murdoch.

"Arnon Mishkin, who leads the FOX News Decision Desk, made the Arizona call on election night and FOX News Media President Jay Wallace was then called in the control room," the spokesperson said. "Any other version of the story is wildly inaccurate."

Wolff's excerpt also set forth Trump's alleged response to the Fox News projection.

"What the f---? How can they call this?" Trump exclaimed after hearing Fox News' Arizona projection decision, per the book. "We're winning. And everybody can see we are going to win. Everybody's calling to say that we're winning. And then they pull this?"

Though Wolff will continue to receive pushback from members of both the Trump campaign and administration, "Landslide: The Final Days of the Trump Presidency" is still slated to hit shelves at the end of the month.

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South Korea, Vatican Mulling Logistics of Pope Francis' Possible North Korea Trip
by [Evan Craighead](#)

Back in 2018, South Korean President Moon Jae-in informed Pope Francis that North Korean leader Kim Jong Un extended an invitation for him to visit the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK). Despite Moon's efforts to relay the invite, Vatican officials declared that such a request would have to be submitted in writing.

Park Jie-won, director of South Korea's National Intelligence Service, revealed to attendees of a Mokpo, South Korea, mass this week that he intends to discuss a tentative papal visit to North Korea with Archbishop Lazarus You Heung-sik, the recently-appointed prefect of the Vatican Congregation for Clergy, and the Vatican ambassador to South Korea, Archbishop Alfred Xuereb.

Park's announcement of the pope's potential North Korea visit, first reported by Vatican-affiliated news agency Fides, was met with skepticism by the Vatican Congregation for Clergy prefect.

"Humanly, there seems to be little hope, but since God is omnipotent, I try, by praying to him, to welcome all that can be useful to promote peace," the archbishop [declared to Fides](#).

While the archbishop cast doubt on the trip coming to fruition, the prospect for peace on the Korean Peninsula may be a selling point for the head of the Catholic Church, according to Vatican officials.

Just days out of surgery, Pope Francis has temporarily slowed down on public appearances, but does plan to visit both Slovakia and Hungary in September.

Vatican spokesperson Matteo Bruni informed [Reuters earlier this week](#) that these were the only finalized trips.

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It's Getting Hot, Hot, Hot: NOAA Reveals US Endured Hottest June in Over 120 Years
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Weather trackers at the US' National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) previously declared that the hottest June was recorded in 2016, when average temperatures across the contiguous US reached 71.7 degrees Fahrenheit.

The US mainland recorded its hottest June ever in 2021 after blowing past the previously recorded high by just 0.9 degrees Fahrenheit, a new [climate report](#) released by NOAA on Friday has revealed.

The newly released findings placed the average June temperature in 2021 for the contiguous US at 72.6 degrees Fahrenheit, a reading that effectively marked the hottest high in 127 years of consistent record keeping by the agency.

NOAA explained in its report that the new high was prompted by "exceptional heat waves" that were bolstered by a "ridge of high pressure" across the lower 48, with new high temperatures being recorded during the last week of June.

"Eight states - Arizona, California, Idaho, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, Rhode Island and Utah - also saw their hottest June on record," the report details. "Six other states - Connecticut, Maine, Montana, Oregon, Washington and Wyoming - marked their 2nd hottest June."

While it was also noted that the new June high was 4.2 degrees Fahrenheit above the 20th-century average, NOAA found that the year-to-date average for the country reached 49.3 degrees Fahrenheit, which marked it the third warmest on record for the specified time period. When it came to the nation's average precipitation tally, NOAA determined that at 2.93 inches, it matched past historical averages, even though some states endured polar extremes in rainfall. Roughly 44% of the contiguous US was experiencing a drought at the beginning of June, with figures jumping to 47% by the end of the month.

In fact, the worsening drought conditions recently prompted California Gov. Gavin Newsom to call on residents living in 50 of the state's 58 counties to voluntarily pull back on their household water usage by at least 15%.

[Latest figures](#) released by the state indicate that 85.4% of the Golden State is under an "extreme drought" alert, conditions of which neighboring states, such as Oregon, Nevada, Washington and Idaho, are also experiencing.

The report also outlined that in the first six months of the year, the US experienced eight weather and climate disasters that amounted to billions upon billions in losses. The costliest of the group, which came in at approximately \$20 billion, was prompted by the winter storm and cold wave that occurred in mid-February and consumed much of the northwest, central and eastern US.

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Biden to Take Action in Response to Ransomware Attacks in 'Days, Weeks Ahead,' Senior Official Says
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Over the last several months, the US has been hit with several ransomware attacks, with the Kaseya hack serving as the latest and largest to recently emerge. It is believed that the notorious REvil hacking group is behind the cyberattack, which affected thousands across 17 countries, including Sweden, Germany and the Netherlands.

The Biden administration is gearing up to take action in the next few days and weeks in response to the recent [Kaseya ransomware attack](#) that is believed to have been executed by REvil, a senior administration official has revealed.

The senior official informed reporters during a telephone briefing that the Biden White House intends to take "necessary action" in the "days and weeks ahead" as a means to protect American infrastructure. However, the unidentified official also underscored that the administration will not be publicly outlining its next steps in the matter.

"I think the President [Joe Biden] was asked today if he expected the United States to take action, to follow up he said 'yes,'" the official told reporters. "We're not going to telegraph what those actions will be precisely, some of them will be manifest and visible, some of them may not be."

"We expect those to take place in the days and weeks ahead," the individual added.

The senior administration official further refused to confirm whether Biden instructed directed attacks on servers that were used by the hacking group.

"That's obviously not something that we would speak to publicly in terms of any specific actions that the president has or hasn't ordered. So I just won't speak to those operational questions in detail," the official said.

Although an earlier Kremlin readout of conversations between Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin stated no requests have been made over the last month for Russia to clamp down on cybercriminals, the senior official told reporters that the US has "relayed multiple specific requests for action."

The latest remarks came hours after Biden and Putin held a [phone conversation](#) in which Biden indicated that the US would "take any necessary action to defend its people and its critical infrastructure," as cyberattacks have continued to plague American companies. Shortly after the call, Biden relayed to reporters that he felt "optimistic" about the current situation.

Ahead of the Kaseya strike, the US was dealt a blow with hacks against both major meat producer [JBS](#) and the [Colonial Pipeline](#), the latter of which prompted widespread gas shortages along much of the US East Coast. As a result of the incidents, Biden issued a [directive](#) that made it a requirement for companies to report any cyberattacks to federal authorities.

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Video: Major Explosion Rattles Tehran, Causes Yet Unknown
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

Fire and rescue teams rushed to the scene, as eyewitnesses detailed the initial blast sounding "like a building collapsed," according to local media reports.

A massive blast and subsequent fire was reported late Friday in the western district of Tehran, Iran, prompting many residents in the area to seek cover.

Reports have suggested that the explosion erupted inside a residential building near Mellat Park, one of the capital province's largest green spaces. It is believed that the explosion was caused by a malfunction in the building's gas system.

At present, reports indicate that the blast caused no fatalities.

Citing a spokesperson for the local fire department, the Fars News Agency reported that officials are on the scene and examining the blaze.

Video footage said to be from the scene has emerged on social media, depicting a major fire that followed the blast.

Local media outlets have cited eyewitnesses as detailing that the late Friday explosion "sounded like a building collapsed." An earlier report from the Fars News Agency also described the blast as a "terrible sound" that rang out across western Tehran.

Hamidreza Goudarzi, the deputy security chief for the Tehran Province, noted in a statement to the Tasnim News Agency that "there was only one explosion," and that officials were at the scene. Goudarzi did not confirm or deny whether the blast was part of a planned attack, as the area is near the headquarters of the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, the New York Times [reported](#).

An investigation into the cause of the blast remains ongoing.

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‘This Will Not Happen’: Netanyahu Silences Heckler Yelling Bennett, Lapid ‘Need to Die’
by [Gaby Arancibia](#)

The former prime minister's 12-year reign came to a close when Naftali Bennett won the golden ticket to take up the Israeli government post. Under the coalition agreement, Bennett will hold the position for two years before Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid serves as the alternate prime minister.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu engaged in a bit of a shouting match late Thursday after a heckler at a political event called for the death of the current Israeli prime minister and the Israeli foreign minister.

The incident unfolded while Netanyahu was speaking at a youth event in Tel Aviv for the nation's Likud Party, which the former prime minister heads as the organization's chairperson.

Video of the brief altercation shows Netanyahu conversing with the crowd before an individual from the crowd yells out, "Bennett and Lapid need to die."

Without missing a beat, Netanyahu rejected the call, telling the individual that "if you are a plant, you've done your job, if not, you're stupid." He later proceeded to say that his opposition party would not sink so low, opting instead to best the current government in the next election cycle.

"This will not happen, nobody will die," Netanyahu said in response, per a [translation](#) provided by the Times of Israel. "I will not accept such things."

It was later reported by local media that the unidentified individual was subsequently interviewed by the Shin Bet security service before being allowed to return home.

Yaya Fink, the head of Israel's left-leaning Darkenu movement, has since called on the Israeli attorney general to launch an investigation into the incident. "The next political assassination may be around the corner and we must stop the instigators before the words turn into bullets," he said.

Incidentally, Netanyahu was serving as an opposition leader when, in November 1995, right-wing gunman Yigal Amir assassinated former Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. At the time and since, Netanyahu has [largely been blamed](#) for creating an atmosphere of hate that encouraged Amir to act out.

In fact, months before the assassination, Netanyahu participated in demonstrations in which crowds chanted "death to Rabin," as well as one that saw the former Israeli prime minister walking in a mock funeral procession.

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US Delegation Travels to Haiti to Review Country's Security - Washington

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - A delegation of US intelligence and security officials traveled to Haiti on Sunday as the Caribbean country is reeling from the assassination of President Jovenel Moise, National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said on Monday.

"On July 11, a United States interagency delegation with representatives from the Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, Department of State, and National Security Council traveled to Haiti in response to the Haitian government's request for security and investigative assistance following the July 7 assassination of Haitian President Jovenel Moise," the statement said.

The US delegation met with acting Prime Minister Claude Joseph and Prime Minister-Designate Ariel Henry as well as Haitian National Police members that are conducting a probe into the assassination of Moise.

"In all their meetings the delegation committed to supporting the Haitian government as it seeks justice in this case and affirmed the United States' support for the people of Haiti in this challenging time," the statement added. "The United States stands with Haiti in becoming a safer, more democratic country."

Moise and his wife, Martine Moise, were shot at their private residence last week. The First Lady suffered a severe abdominal injury and was airlifted to a hospital in Miami for treatment. On Monday, Joseph confirmed that she was feeling well and was recovering.

Meanwhile, the Haitian police believe that a group of 26 Colombians and two Americans of Haitian descent are suspected of being complicit in the assassination. The head of Moise's security guard, Dimitri Herard, reportedly often traveled to Colombia and is expected to explain his frequent trips to Ecuador with stopovers in Bogota during an upcoming interrogation this week. The dates of Herard's latest trips reportedly correspond to the time when the final details of Moise's assassination were discussed.

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US, French Defense Chiefs Agree to Increase Cooperation on Special Operations - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and his French counterpart Florence Parly signed an agreement to increase cooperation in the area of special operations, Defense Department spokesperson John Kirby said in a press release.

"Secretary Austin and Minister Parly concluded their meeting with a signing ceremony of the US-France Roadmap for Increased Cooperation in the Area of Special Operations," Kirby said on Friday. "The Roadmap signals US and French intent to identify areas where increased special operations coordination and cooperation is possible."

Kirby said the two defense chiefs specifically discussed bilateral cooperation to address security challenges in the Middle East and Africa.

In June, Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu said terrorism remains the key threat to stability in the Middle East and Africa. Shoigu said after the Islamic State terror group (banned in Russia) was eradicated in Syria and Iraq, most of the fighters moved to Libya, but there are also terrorist cells in Mali, the Central African Republic and Mozambique.

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Canadian Judge Rejects Huawei CFO's Application to Adduce HSBC Documents

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - A Canadian judge has rejected Huawei CFO Meng Wanzhou's application to adduce documents from HSBC as supplementary evidence in her extradition process.

In April, the High Court of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region ordered HSBC, which Meng is alleged by the US Justice Department to have defrauded, to release additional documents to the executive's defense team and to Canadian government prosecutors representing the Attorney General of Canada (AGC), which is representing the United States. "My decision is that the application is denied. The HSBC documents will not be admitted," British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Heather Holmes said during a hearing on Friday. Holmes said part of a Huawei PowerPoint presentation would be admissible, however, the admission of the full presentation would require both the AGC and the executive legal counsel's consent. Both parties said they would need time to review the material, which delves into Huawei's compliance with international sanctions on Iran.

The written decision will be made public within the next ten days, Holmes said.

The decision to reject the supplementary evidence is significant given that Meng's legal team had billed the documents as "fatal" to US efforts to extradite the executive. Government prosecutors, however, maintained that the documents are suitable for a trial, as opposed to an extradition process.

Huawei expressed a regret regarding the ruling saying that despite the decision the documents demonstrated the HSBC executives knew Skycom's accounts with the multinational financial conglomerate were controlled by Huawei.

The Justice Department alleges that Meng committed fraud by misleading HSBC into approving more than \$100 million in transactions that contravened US sanctions on Iran from 2010 to 2014. Skycom is alleged to have acted as a shell company for Huawei in its transactions with Iran.

Meng, the daughter of Huawei founder and CEO Ren Zhengfei, was arrested on December 1, 2018 at Vancouver International Airport during a layover stop at the request of the US government.

Meng remains under house arrest in Vancouver, although is free to traverse the region in the company of state-imposed guards outside of her 11:00 p.m to 6:00 a.m. curfew.

Meng will next appear during a case management conference on July 29 at 9:15 a.m. PDT (04:15 p.m. GMT).

The final arguments in the 18-month-long extradition process will begin on August 3.

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PREVIEW - Billionaire Richard Branson to Fly as Mission Specialist on Virgin Galactic Spaceship

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - British billionaire Richard Branson will fly on the next test flight of his Virgin Galactic Unity spacecraft probably later this month, the company announced in a press release.

"I truly believe that space belongs to all of us," Branson said in the release on Friday. "After more than 16 years of research, engineering, and testing, Virgin Galactic stands at the vanguard

of a new commercial space industry, which is set to open space to humankind and change the world for good."

The mission will be the 22nd flight test for Unity and the company's fourth crewed spaceflight. It will also be the first to carry a full crew of two pilots and four mission specialists including company founder Branson, Virgin Galactic said.

"Branson will evaluate the private astronaut experience and will undergo the same training, preparation and flight as Virgin Galactic's future astronauts. The company will use his observations from his flight training and spaceflight experience to enhance the journey for all future astronaut customers," the release said.

Virgin Galactic Holdings, which is a vertically integrated aerospace and space travel company, said the flight window for the next rocket-powered test flight of the spacecraft will open on Sunday, pending weather and technical checks.

The mission will seek to evaluate the commercial customer cabin with a full crew, including the cabin environment, seat comfort, the weightless experience, and the views of Earth that the spaceship delivers, the release said.

"It's one thing to have a dream of making space more accessible to all; it's another for an incredible team to collectively turn that dream into reality. As part of a remarkable crew of mission specialists, I'm honored to help validate the journey our future astronauts will undertake," Branson said in the release.

The flight's other three mission specialists will be Beth Moses, Chief Astronaut Instructor at Virgin Galactic, Colin Bennett, Lead Operations Engineer at Virgin Galactic and Sirisha Bandla, Vice President of Government Affairs and Research Operations at Virgin Galactic, the release said.

The pilots for the mission are Dave Mackay and Michael Masucci, the release added.

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Cat Recovered in Florida Building Collapse, Reunited With Family - Mayor

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - A cat that lived in the Surfside condominium building that collapsed was found alive near the site of the debris more than two weeks after the incident, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said

"I'm happy to be able to share a small piece of good news," Cava said on Friday evening.

"Banks, a cat living on the ninth floor of Champlain Towers South, was recently found near the site and a few hours ago he was reunited with his family."

A volunteer found Banks near the site of the rubble and took him to a local animal shelter where he was later identified.

As of Friday evening, the death count in the collapsed building stands at 79 with 61 residents still missing, according to the mayor.

The incident in Surfside occurred on June 24, when the 12-story Champlain Towers South residential building partially collapsed.

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Lockheed Martin Wins Contract to Sustain C-130J Transport Weapons Systems - Pentagon

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - Lockheed Martin has won an almost \$58 million US Air Force contract to sustain the weapons systems on the fleet of C-130J military airlift planes, the Defense Department said.

"Lockheed Martin Corporation [of] Marietta, Georgia has been awarded a \$57,843,433 ...modification ...contract for C-130J long-term sustainment," the Defense Department said in a press release on Friday.

Sustainment services include program support, inventory control point management, consumable spares replenishment, repairs, sustaining engineering support, technical data, and depot activation, the release said.

Work on the contract will be performed in Marietta, Georgia, and is expected to be completed by January 31, 2022, the release added.

The Lockheed Martin C-130J Super Hercules is a four-engine turboprop military transport aircraft and is a comprehensive update of the C-130 Hercules with new engines, flight deck, and other systems. At least 400 C-130J aircraft have been delivered to 17 other nations, according to the Defense Department.

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One Additional Body Found in Florida Building Collapse, Death Toll Rises to 79 - Mayor

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - One additional body has been recovered in the rubble from the Surfside condominium building collapse, raising the total number of dead in the incident to 79, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava said during a press conference.

"Today we recovered another victim," Cava said on Friday evening. "The total number of confirmed deaths is now 79."

Cava said the bodies of 61 residents who lived in the apartment building are still missing. The tragedy in Surfside occurred on June 24, when the 12-story Champlain Towers South residential building partially collapsed.

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Latest US Sanctions Against Russian Firms Contradict Geneva Summit Statements - Embassy

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The latest sanctions imposed by the United States against Russian companies contradicts the Geneva summit statements that call for normalization of bilateral relations, the Russian Embassy in Washington said in a statement.

"This is another confrontational step as part of Washington's deliberate efforts to restrict the access of domestic enterprises to high-precision technologies from abroad," the statement said on Friday. "This fundamentally contradicts with the statements of the United States authorities, including during the summit in Geneva, about the need to normalize the entire range of bilateral relations."

The US government blacklisted 34 foreign entities, including 23 from China, in connection to the situation in the Xinjiang province as well as six companies from Russia for procurement of military electronic components, according to the Commerce Department ruling published on Monday.

"We paid attention to the conclusion of the Commerce Department. It concerns export control lists, which included Moscow firms working with microelectronics," the Russian Embassy said.

"At the same time, the American side again did not provide any specifics as to which violations were revealed."

Most Chinese companies added to the economic blacklist "have been implicated in human rights violations and abuses in the implementation of China's campaign of repression, mass detention, and high-technology surveillance against Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other members of Muslim minority groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," according to the ruling. However, China has routinely denied any wrongdoing.

The Russian entities found themselves on the US black list due to their alleged involvement in the procurement of US-made electronic components which are deemed by Washington as capable of advancing Russian military programs, according to the document.

The Commerce Department blacklisted three Russian companies, OOO Teson, OOO Trade-Component, and Radiant Group of Companies, along with three individuals, Andrey Kuznetsov, Dmitry Kravchenko, and Margarita Kuznetsova.

Other additions to the blacklist include entities from Canada, Iran, Lebanon, Netherlands, Pakistan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.

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Pedersen Welcomes UNSC Adoption of Aid Resolution as Start of Greater Unity on Syria

UNITED NATIONS, July 9 (Sputnik) - United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Geir Pedersen expressed hope that the UN Security Council's unanimous adoption of a resolution authorizing cross-border aid deliveries into northwestern Syria could serve as the beginning of building more international unity to reach a political settlement to the conflict in the Arab Republic, Pedersen's press office said in a statement.

"UN Special Envoy for Syria Mr. Geir O. Pedersen joins the Secretary-General in welcoming the adoption of Security Council resolution 2585 (2021) and the continuation of cross-border UN humanitarian assistance for millions in Syria," the statement said on Friday.

"The Special Envoy hopes that today's Council decision can be the beginning of building more international unity, in a manner that could help move the Syrian political process forward towards the implementation of Security Council resolution 2254 (2015)," it said.

Pedersen also reaffirmed the importance for the United Nations and aid agencies to continue supporting people in need in Syria through both cross-border and cross-line humanitarian deliveries.

On Friday, the UN Security Council voted to unanimously adopt a resolution, jointly drafted by Russia, the United States, Norway and Ireland, extending the cross-border aid delivery mechanism through the Bab al-Hawa crossing in Turkey for six months, with a possible extension until July 10, 2022.

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Pentagon Does Not Comment on Haiti's Request for US Troops

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The US Defense Department refused to comment on Haiti's request for American troops after the murder of the country's President Jovenel Moise.

"We refer you to the US State Department," the Defense Department press office said to Sputnik.

The State Department has not responded to the request for comment either.

Haiti's Minister of Elections Mathias Pierre was quoted by media as saying that the country requested the deployment of US troops to protect Haiti's key infrastructure.

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Canadian Judge Rejects Huawei CFO's Application to Adduce HSBC Documents

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In April, the High Court of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region ordered HSBC, which Meng is alleged by the US Justice Department to have defrauded, to release additional documents to the executive's defense team and to Canadian government prosecutors representing the Attorney General of Canada (AGC), which is representing the US.

"My decision is that the application is denied. The HSBC documents will not be admitted," British Columbia Supreme Court Justice Heather Holmes said during a hearing on Friday.

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US Stocks Up 3rd Week Running, S&P 500 Hits Another Record High

NEW YORK, July 9 (Sputnik) - US stocks rebounded sharply Friday from the previous day's COVID-triggered sell-off to end on the up for a third straight week, with the S&P 500 index hitting another record high that extended its recent streak of all-time peaks.

The Dow Jones Industrial Average, the broadest US equity barometer on the New York Stock Exchange, finished at 34,870, up 448 points or 1.3 percent. For the week, the Dow rose 0.2 percent.

The Nasdaq Composite index, which includes high-flying tech stocks such as Facebook, Amazon, Apple, Microsoft, Netflix and Google, finished up 142 points, or almost 1.0 percent, at 14,702. For the week, the Nasdaq rose 0.4 percent.

The S&P 500 index, which groups the top 500 stocks on the New York Stock Exchange, rebounded by 49 points, or 1.1 percent, to close at 4,370. It hit a record high of 4,372 during the session. For the week, the S&P 500 rose 0.4%.

Stocks fell their most in three weeks on Thursday, with all three indexes losing about 1 percent on average, on worries that the United States might be headed for a "dangerous" fall season with the Delta variant of the coronavirus likely to spark another surge of infections. Already the dominant US variant of the virus, Delta is prevalent in states with the lowest vaccination rates, as well as lax safety measures that do not encourage masking, social distancing or capacity limits for events, experts said.

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SPUTNIK TOP STORIES OF THE DAY

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) -

PUTIN-BIDEN TALKS

- * US President Joe Biden held a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday, the White House said.
- * Biden and Putin discussed the ongoing ransomware attacks in the United States and the extension of the UN Syria aid mechanism that was adopted earlier in the day, the White House said.
- * The recent ransomware attack on the US Republican National Committee was a big focus during the telephone call between Biden and Putin earlier in the day, White House spokesperson Jen Psaki said.
- * Biden said it would make sense to attack the servers that are used to carry out ransomware attacks, a White House pool correspondent reported.
- * Biden told reporters that his telephone call with Putin went well and he feels optimistic.

HAITI DEVELOPMENTS

- * The United States will support Haiti's investigation into the assassination of President Jovenel Moise by providing additional manpower and financial resources, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.
- * The Haitian authorities' investigation into the assassination of Moise will not impact the aid the United States provides to the Caribbean country, Psaki said.
- * The United States dispatches senior law enforcement officials to Haiti following the assassination of the country's leader, Psaki told reporters.

INTERNATIONAL TALKS ON SYRIA

- * Washington views the unanimous adoption of the UN Security Council resolution extending for up to 12 months cross-border humanitarian deliveries into northwestern Syria as an important moment in relations with Russia, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told reporters on Friday.
- * UN Security Council on Friday unanimously adopted a resolution extending the cross-border aid delivery mechanism in northwest Syria for 12 months, Security Council President French Ambassador Nicolas de Riviere said following the vote.

AFGHANISTAN

- * Afghanistan is calling on China, India and Russia to help the country's defense and security forces fight terrorism, rather than interfere in internal affairs, Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's National Security Advisor Hamdullah Mohib said on Friday.
- * Afghan President Ashraf Ghani arrived at the Bagram air base after the US forces withdrew a week ago, the 1TV News reported.
- * The Taliban movement (outlawed in Russia) is ready for a dialogue with the United States and start relations from the beginning, Shahabuddin Delawar, the head of the group's delegation said upon arriving in Moscow.

* The Taliban movement did not promise the United States not to capture capitals of the Afghan regions, Delawar said.

* Russia calls for the implementation of the peace agreement between the United States and the Taliban movement (outlawed in Russia), Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said.

* The Taliban movement captured another checkpoint on the Afghan-Iranian border, the Pajhwok news agency reported, citing sources.

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Biden Picks Former Hillary Clinton Assistant as His Envoy to Chile - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has named a former special assistant presidential candidate Hillary Clinton as US Ambassador to Chile, the White House announced on Friday.

"Bernadette Meehan [is the president's] Nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of Chile," the White House said in a statement.

Meehan currently serves as the Executive Vice President of Global Programs for the Obama Foundation, where she served previously as Chief International Officer and Executive Director of International Programs, the statement noted.

"Meehan served as Special Assistant to Secretary of State Hillary Clinton ... [and as] Special Assistant to the Ambassador at the US Embassy in Baghdad, Iraq; and Consular Officer at the US Embassy in Bogota, Colombia," the White House said.

During her time with the State Department, Meehan also worked in multiple positions at the National Security Council, including as a Senior Advisor, as Special Assistant to the President and National Security Council Spokesperson, and earlier, as Director for Strategic Communications, the statement added.

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Biden Names Veteran World Trade Expert as Ambassador to Bangladesh – White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has chosen veteran diplomat and trade policy expert Peter Haas as the next US ambassador to Bangladesh, the White House said on Friday.

"Peter Haas [is the president's] nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to [the] People's Republic of Bangladesh," the White House statement said.

Haas is a career member of the US Senior Foreign Service who holds the class of Minister-Counselor and currently serves as Acting Assistant Secretary of State and Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary for Economic and Business Affairs for the Department of State, the statement noted.

"Previously, Haas was Senior Advisor/Deputy Assistant Secretary for Trade Policy and Negotiations for the State Department and prior to that was the Deputy Permanent Representative to the US Mission to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in Paris, France," it said.

Haas has also served in positions across five geographic bureaus of the State Department including as Consul General of the US Consulate General in Mumbai, India, the White House said.

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Biden Picks Experienced Europe Affairs Diplomat as US Ambassador to France - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - President Joe Biden has named veteran diplomat and European affairs Denise Campbell Bauer as US Ambassador to France, the White House said on Friday.

"Denise Campbell Bauer [is named as] Nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the French Republic and to the Principality of Monaco," the White House said in a statement. "Denise Campbell Bauer is an experienced diplomat, non-profit leader, and advocate for women's voices in politics."

Bauer previously served as US ambassador to Belgium from August 2013 until January 2017, where she led one of the largest embassies in Europe and earned a reputation for her collaborative leadership style, high ethics standards, and crisis management skills, the White House said.

"In that role, she focused on building transatlantic security partnerships and expanding international trade. ... In 2019, Bauer became the Executive Director of Women for Biden, a nationwide network of women that organized and mobilized to elect President Biden," the statement noted.

Bauer, who speaks French, began her career in Los Angeles. In 2012 she ran a women's support campaign for the successful Obama-Biden presidential campaign, the White House said.

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Biden Names LA Mayor, Ex-US Intelligence Officer as Next Envoy to India – White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden has selected the long-serving Mayor of Los Angeles, Eric Garcetti, as his first ambassador to India, the White House announced on Friday.

"Eric M. Garcetti [is the] Nominee for Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to the Republic of India," the White House said in a statement. "Garcetti has been the Mayor of the City of Los Angeles since 2013, following 12 years as a member of the City Council, including six as Council President."

As Mayor of Los Angeles, Garcetti oversaw the busiest container port in the Western Hemisphere, the largest municipal utility in the United States and one of the busiest airports in the world, the White House noted.

"During 12 years as an Intelligence Officer in the US Navy Reserve Component, Garcetti served under the Commander, US Pacific Fleet and the Defense Intelligence Agency, retiring in 2017 as a Lieutenant. A Rhodes Scholar, he studied at Queen's College, Oxford," the statement said. Garcetti co-founded Climate Mayors and led more than 400 US mayors to adopt the Paris Climate Agreement. He is the current Chair of C40 Cities – a network of 97 of the world's biggest cities taking climate action and has led the organization's engagement and expansion in India as well, the White House said.

If confirmed by the Senate, Garcetti would need to vacate his posts to take up the diplomatic role in New Delhi.

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US Relayed to Russia Multiple Requests for Action on Cybercriminals - Official

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The United States relayed to Russia multiple specific requests for action on cybercriminals, a senior US administration official said on Friday apparently contradicting Russian statements on the matter.

"We have relayed multiple specific requests for action on cybercriminals to Russia through official channels and being clear about what Russia's responsibility is with regard to taking action, including again today at the level of two presidents," the official said during a phone briefing.

At the same time, the Kremlin readout of the conversation quotes Putin as saying there have been no requests from the US side throughout the last month.

US President Joe Biden discussed earlier on Friday the issue of ransomware attacks with his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin in an hour-long phone call, their first direct engagement since last month's summit in Geneva.

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Senior US Official Refuses to Say Whether Biden Ordered Attacks on Servers Used By Hackers

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - A senior Biden administration refused to say during a press call on Friday whether US President Joe Biden has directed attacks on servers used by hackers acting against the United States.

"That's obviously not something that we would speak to publicly in terms of any specific actions that the President has or hasn't ordered. So I just won't speak to those operational questions in detail," the senior official said.

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Biden and Putin Talk Syria, Commend Teams for Cross-Border Aid Work at UN - Official
WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - Presidents Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin both commended their UN missions' work on renewing cross-border humanitarian aid agreements in Syria during a call between the two leaders, a senior administration official said on Friday.

"The leaders commended the work of their respective teams following the US-Russia summit that lead to today's unanimous renewal of cross-border humanitarian assistance to Syria in the UN Security Council," the official said.

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US to Take Action in Response to Ransomware Attacks in Days, Weeks Ahead - Official

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will take retaliatory action against cybercriminal groups responsible for attacks against the United States in the days and weeks ahead, a senior administration official said on Friday.

"I think the President [Joe Biden] was asked today if he expected the United States to take action, to follow up he said 'yes,'" the official said during a telephone briefing. "We're not going to telegraph what those actions will be precisely, some of them will be manifest and visible, some of them may not be. We expect those to take place in the days and weeks ahead."

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Senior US Administration Official Refuses to Say Whether Biden Ordered Attacks on Servers Used by Hackers

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Biden During Call With Putin Underscored Need to Disrupt Ransomware Attacks - Official

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden in his phone talk with Russian President Vladimir Putin pointed out the need to disrupt ransomware attacks and expressed willingness to engage with Russia, a senior administration official told reporters on Friday.

"President Biden underscored the need for Russia to take action to disrupt ransomware groups operating on Russian territory and emphasized that he's committed to continuing engagements on the broader threat posed by ransomware," the official said. "The President believes strongly in this leader-level engagements on this issue as well."

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Biden Says It Would Make Sense For US to Attack Servers Used in Ransomware Attacks

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden said on Friday it would make sense to attack the servers that are used to carry out ransomware attacks, a White House pool correspondent shared in a report.

"Yes," Biden said at Joint Base Andrews when asked whether it would be reasonable to carry out an attack, but he did not specify if he planned to direct officials to do so, Weijia Jiang of CBS News said via Twitter.

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US Sentences Ex-Russian Military Contractor to 5 Years in Prison, Sputnik Learns

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - A US court on Friday sentenced Leonid Teyf, former deputy director of the Russian military contractor Voentorg, to five years in prison, a court clerk told Sputnik.

"He was sentenced to 60 months," the court clerk said.

In March, Teyf pleaded guilty to bribery of a public official, visa fraud and false statements on tax returns. He was sentenced to 60 months in prison on the first and second counts and to 36 months on the third count.

"All such terms to be served concurrently, producing a total term of 60 months," the court ruling said.

As part of his plea deal, Teyf and his wife also agreed to forfeit assets in the amount of \$5.9 million and to be deported.

Prosecutors initially accused Teyf of running a scheme through which he allegedly stole and laundered \$150 million from the Russian government starting in 2010 when then-Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov granted Voentorg a contract to provide the military with goods and services.

The plea deal allowed for the dismissal of a number of charges against Teyf, including the murder-for-hire, firearm, money laundering and harboring illegal aliens, the Justice Department said in a release.

All charges against the defendant's wife, Tatiana Teyf, have been dismissed and the US government will not seek a prison term pursuant to her plea, the Justice Department added.

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Haitian Envoy to US Calls For Magnitsky Sanctions Against Those Involved in Assassination

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - Haitian Ambassador to the United States Bocchit Edmond revealed in a Twitter statement on Friday that he has asked US Secretary of State Antony Blinken to introduce Magnitsky sanctions against those involved in the assassination of the President Jovenel Moise.

"On behalf of the Haitian Government PM @claudjoseph03, I have requested the assistance of the United States Government with our ongoing investigation to bring those responsible for the heinous murder of @moisejovenel to justice," Edmond wrote. "We further requested for the US to impose sanctions under the Global Magnitsky Act on all perpetrators who are directly responsible or aided and abetted in the assassination."

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No US Embassy Personnel Injured in Firing on Diplomatic Vehicle in Eswatini - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US Department of State Deputy Spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday no personnel was injured in Eswatini in an incident with soldiers firing on a US diplomatic vehicle amid the ongoing protests.

On Thursday, the US Embassy in Eswatini said shots were fired at a diplomatic vehicle on July 1. The embassy said the US Ambassador was not in the vehicle at the time of the shooting, refuting earlier reports suggesting the opposite.

"We're certainly aware of the incident that shots were fired on the [US] Embassy's vehicle on July 1, 2021, in Eswatini. However, no embassy personnel was injured at the event," Porter said in a press briefing.

She said the US Embassy in Eswatini was working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the International Cooperation of the Kingdom of Eswatini to address the incident.

"The safety and security of US citizens, and, of course, our employees is our highest priority," Porter added.

Eswatini, up until 2018 known as Swaziland, has recently been rocked by deadly protests against the absolute monarchy's rule over the country. The pro-democracy protests have reportedly been met with violence by the security forces.

Reports by opposition political movements have suggested that between 40 and 69 people died during the protests since late June. The government, in turn, said it was investigating the number of deaths and condemned what it called misinformation on the issue.

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US Aware 2 Americans Arrested Over Assassination of Haitian President - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The United States is aware that two US citizens have been arrested in Haiti in relation to the killing of President Jovenel Moise and continues to follow the situation closely, State Department deputy spokesperson Jalina Porter said on Friday.

The Haitian authorities apprehended 17 suspects, including two Haitian-born US citizens, identified as James Solages and Joseph Vincent.

"We're certainly aware of the arrest of the two US citizens in Haiti and continue to closely monitor the situation. However, due to the privacy considerations, we won't comment any further," Porter said during a press briefing.

The Haitian police have reportedly identified 28 suspects for whom they claim were members of the group that murdered Moise and most are citizens of Colombia.

Moise was shot dead at his private residence on Wednesday morning and his wife was wounded in the attack. The authorities said they do not know at present the motive for the assassination. The White House announced on Friday that it will be sending senior FBI officials to help in the investigation of Moise's assassination.

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Family of Black Man Killed in Minneapolis Police Chase Plans to File Lawsuit - Attorney

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The Family of Leneal Frazier, a Black man killed when he was caught in middle of a Minneapolis police chase, will file a lawsuit against the city, Attorney Jeff Storms said on Friday.

The 40-year-old Leneal Fraizer was the uncle of Darnella Frazier, the girl who recorded the viral video of George Floyd's death last year.

"Will there be a lawsuit? You bet," Storms said during a press conference.

The legal team is waiting for more facts to emerge from the incident before they finalize the lawsuit, Storms said.

Storms said prosecutors need to investigate whether there are any potential criminal charges in this incident.

Surveillance video of the incident that occurred on Tuesday shows Frazier driving across an intersection the moment a high-speed pursuit crossed his path. The car being pursued sped through the intersection at a high speed, barely missing Frazier, but the Minneapolis police car was unable to avoid hitting his vehicle.

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Ransomware Attacks Big Focus of Biden-Putin Telephone Call - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - Ongoing ransomware attacks was a big focus of the telephone call between Joe Biden and Vladimir Putin with the US president urging his Russian counterpart to rein in criminal hackers and warning that otherwise the United States states may take action, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday.

During her daily briefing Psaki spoke at length about the hour-long conversation between the two leaders - their first direct engagement following last month's summit in Geneva.

"The ransomware attack that happened over the course of last weekend was a big focus of the call," Psaki told reporters.

The latest ransomware attacks included the breach against the IT management software company Kaseya, which affected a number of US companies. US media reported that these attacks were allegedly conducted by the Russia-linked REvil hacking group.

Psaki said the Biden administration does not have any new information indicating the Russian government directed the latest ransomware attack against US targets. The United States believes that Russia has a responsibility to crack down on hackers operating from its territory and reserves the right to act if these expectations are not met, she said.

"He reiterated that the United States will take any necessary action to defend its people and its critical infrastructure, and he also reiterated his expectation that President Putin take action, even if it is not directed by the Russian government and if it is because of criminal actors in his own country," Psaki said.

"While we are not going to preview operationally what... he may decide to do, he did make clear that he reserves that option to take action," she added.

Psaki refused to disclose Putin's response.

During the June 16 summit in Switzerland, Putin and Biden agreed to launch bilateral cybersecurity talks in light of several high-profile cyberattacks against US infrastructure, in which US officials suspected Russian involvement despite Moscow's protests to the contrary.

US officials said earlier that Russian and American experts plan to discuss ransomware attacks during their next meeting in the upcoming days.

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ANALYSIS - Neighbors May Face Cross-Border Spillovers of Afghan Crisis as US Hastens Pullout

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – As the United States continues its hasty withdrawal from the crisis-hit Afghanistan, neighboring Tajikistan and the whole Central Asian region will likely be swept by the wave of instability and violence coming from Afghanistan as the Taliban (terrorist group, banned in Russia) increasingly gains momentum, analysts told Sputnik.

On Thursday, US President Joe Biden in his remarks on US troop drawdown efforts in Afghanistan vowed that the US forces will pull out from the country by August 31. Admitting that the Taliban group is at its strongest point, Biden stressed that its takeover of the country is not inevitable, given that the Afghan military is better equipped, trained and boasts a force 300,000 strong against the Taliban's 75,000.

The US war in Afghanistan, which goes down as America's longest war spanning four presidential administrations, started with Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001. After George Bush vacated the Oval Office, Barack Obama carried on his tactics, with the number of US troops in the tumultuous country ballooning to 100,000 in 2010. After the 2011 killing of Osama bin Laden, the founder of al-Qaeda (terrorist group, banned in Russia), Obama announced the start of a reduction in the number of troops that failed to gather momentum. Obama's successor, Donald Trump, also ordered for the withdrawal of thousands of troops from Afghanistan, and even tweeted that he wanted all troops to be withdrawn by Christmas 2020 – but this, too, failed to materialize.

Before Biden's announcement about the US withdrawal this April, the official number of US troops in Afghanistan reached 2,500, though reports claimed that the actual figure was at least 1,000 more. As for NATO, which is also withdrawing personnel, the official number of non-US servicemen stood at 7,000. Most recently, the US defense said that over 90 percent of the US military personnel and equipment have been withdrawn from the country.

AFFECTING WHOLE REGION

The US, however, is not leaving the region "peaceful" as it had anticipated. In the wake of the withdrawal, the Taliban began gaining strength and seizing parts of Afghanistan. On Friday, the group entered Kandahar, the second-largest city. Overall, the movement claimed to control over 170 Afghan districts out of nearly 400.

The group already advanced toward the border with Tajikistan and claimed to have control of over two-thirds of the Afghan-Tajik border. Tajikistan admitted that it would be difficult to cope with the challenges coming from Afghanistan alone, so the republic appealed to the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) allies for help. According to Dushanbe, the current circumstances require "an adequate response within the CSTO, including the adoption of measures to strengthen the capacity to protect the southern borders."

Raghav Sharma, an associate professor and director of the Centre for Afghanistan Studies at O.P. Jindal Global University, told Sputnik he believes all of Afghanistan's neighbors will be affected by the US-NATO withdrawal. He added that Iran and Pakistan are likely to be most profoundly impacted owing to their deep involvement in Afghan affairs.

"The ascendance of the Taliban is likely to encounter resistance in Afghanistan, particularly so in the urban areas and the country appears to be poised to experience a period of heightened violence and instability. Not only are these developments going to adversely undermine prospects for regional trade and connectivity between South and Central Asia but we will be likely to witness the proliferation of reactionary Islamist ideas across Afghanistan's frontiers," he added.

According to the analyst, an escalation in violence in Afghanistan is going to generate large population movements both inside and outside the country. He noted that since many of Afghanistan's neighbors appear not to be inclined to host large refugee populations, this fact will give "rise to pronounced humanitarian challenges in the region."

"The fact that violence has now reached Tajik borders, particularly following the Taliban capture of Sher Khan Bandar in the Kunduz province, has underlined the challenge that Central Asian Republics would have to contend within the face of an attempt to impose a military solution as is being attempted by the Taliban and their patrons," he said.

Senior Fellow and Director at the Center for Peace and Liberty at the Independent Institute, Ivan Eland, told Sputnik that he also believes that the violence in Afghanistan will likely affect the neighboring nations.

"Tajikistan and other neighbors of Afghanistan may see Afghan instability bleed over their borders," Eland said.

FAILED NATION-BUILDING MISSION

Eland noted that the mission in Afghanistan was accomplished in short order after the US invasion, which was to decimate al Qaeda (terrorist group, banned in Russia) and overthrow the Taliban government.

"After that, it became a failed nation-building mission. Even when bin Laden was killed in 2011, he was in Pakistan. So the pullout is 20 years overdue," he said.

According to the analyst, a civil war with the Taliban is "quite likely."

"The US has to leave some time and it would occur if it left 20 years from now. Besides, the 20 years of US occupation contributed to the rehabilitation of the Taliban among Afghans," he noted.

Former veteran diplomat and Assistant Defense Secretary Chas Freeman also believes that US purposes in Afghanistan were rapidly accomplished. However, the administration under George W. Bush moved the goal posts and began a lengthy campaign of pacification, he said.

"Once charged with this vague mission, the US military and national security establishment had an open-ended mandate in Afghanistan. It is still hard for them to admit what everyone else knows: namely, their pacification, anti-drug, and nation-building campaigns were an utter failure," Freeman added.

NO CHANCES FOR AFGHAN GOV'T

After the US pullout the chances the Afghan government would be able to keep the power and not collapse into a civil war with the Taliban are equal to none, former Pentagon analyst and US Air Force Lieutenant Colonel Karen Kwiatkowski told Sputnik.

"Although there should be a rush by select political groups and individuals to join or buy in politically with the controlling Taliban, and some Kabul former US allies could remain and be useful to the Taliban, as it seeks to end the civil war and get on with an economic recovery and peace," she said.

In late June, reports emerged claiming the US intelligence community estimates that the government of Afghanistan could collapse within six months after the complete withdrawal of US forces. The US intelligence reportedly revised their initial, more optimistic estimates after the Taliban opposition movement seized dozens of localities in northern Afghanistan. Biden later denied the veracity of these reports.

ROLE OF NEIGHBORS

Kwiatkowski suggested China may play a role in the situation as it seeks further investments in the country.

"The larger interests of China are a major factor for Afghanistan's future, and a stable and economically open Afghanistan is desired by all three major hard currency players in Asia (Russia, China and India)," she said.

Retired Army Colonel Douglas Macgregor, a former senior adviser to the Acting US Defense Secretary, meanwhile, believes that India, another key player in the region, will cooperate with

Russia and Iran to contain the influence of the Sunni Islamist elements in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

"China will try to complete its transportation infrastructure [though] Pakistan and part of Afghanistan provided the Chinese can be protected. If not, the Chinese will pick other routes," he added.

Speaking about Russia, McGregor stated that Moscow knows it must work with its Central Asian neighbors and regional Shia power Iran to actively contain the Sunni Islamists and Heroin industry in Afghanistan.

For his part, Raghav Sharma believes that Moscow is unlikely to play a direct role in the Afghan theater given the Soviet history in Afghanistan.

CONTINUED LOSS OF LIFE

Peace talks between Kabul and the Taliban have done little to halt the violence that has been plaguing the war-torn country. The Afghan National Army was ordered to switch to an offensive posture instead of a defensive one last year after a Taliban particularly bloody series of Taliban attacks on civilians, itself multiplying the number of casualties on both sides.

Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman Gran Hewad recently told Sputnik that the current escalation in Afghanistan is leading to an increase in the number of refugees, that are themselves teetering on the edge of a humanitarian catastrophe.

According to Pentagon data, over 2,300 US soldiers were killed in operations in Afghanistan. The number of Afghan civilians killed in the 2 decades of conflict – both from the Taliban and the US operations – is much higher. The Watson Institute of International and Public Affairs at Brown University reported that some 71,000 Afghan civilians were killed since 2001.

"I wish nothing but the best for the people of Afghanistan as they try to rebuild their country and I extend sincere apologies and concern for all the death and destruction caused by the US,"

Cindy Sheehan, a renowned anti-war activist and the mother of an American serviceman who was killed in combat during US operations in Iraq, told Sputnik.

Sheehan doubted that the US will leave entirely from Afghanistan and suggested that Washington will leave some kind of "mercenaries" on the ground.

"As in Afghanistan, nothing that the US can do will bring any civilians or troops back to life, and we should honor their deaths by working for peace," she concluded.

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Biden Says He Made Clear to Putin US Expects Action Against Ransomware Attackers

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The United States expects Russia to take action against cybercriminals conducting ransomware operations from Russian territory if Washington provides the necessary information for Moscow to act, President Joe Biden said during a press briefing on Friday.

"I made it very clear to [Putin] that the United States expects when a ransomware operation is coming from his soil - even though it's not sponsored by the state - we expect them to act if we

give them enough information to act on who that is," Biden said in response to a question about his telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier in the day.

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Biden Says His Telephone Call With Putin Went Well, He is 'Optimistic'

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden told reporters on Friday that his telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin went well and he feels optimistic.

"It went well. I am optimistic," Biden said when asked how did his phone call with Vladimir Putin go.

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US to Send Additional Manpower, Financial Assistance to Haiti as Requested - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The United States will support Haiti's investigation into the assassination of President Jovenel Moise by providing additional manpower and financial resources, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We are... supporting law enforcement efforts on the ground and making sure we are providing resources in terms of women and manpower but also financial resources is part of what our objective is as well," Psaki said during a press briefing. "This action was in response to a specific request."

Psaki said US aid to Haiti would not be affected after the Haitian government arrested two Americans, among others, in connection to Moise's assassination.

Earlier on Friday, US media reported that a Haitian judge said two Haitian-born US citizens have been arrested in connection to Moise's murder, but they only served as translators for the hit squad. The two men were identified as James Solages, a former security guard at the Canadian Embassy in Haiti, and Joseph Vincent.

Moise and his wife were shot at their private residence early Wednesday morning. No motive for the assassination is currently known, although most of the detained suspects are Colombian.

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Haiti Probe Into President Moise's Assassination Not to Impact US Aid - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The Haitian authorities' investigation into the assassination of President Jovenel Moise will not impact the aid the United States provides to the Caribbean country, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The investigation is not going to impact the assistance we're providing," Psaki said when asked if the arrest of two US citizen in connection to Moise's assassination will impact Washington's assistance to Haiti.

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Peruvian Gets 7.5 Years Sentence For Threats Plot Against Immigrants – Justice Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – A US federal court has sentenced a citizen of Peru to seven and a half years imprisonment for a plot to fraudulently extort money from Spanish-speaking immigrants with threats of fictitious legal repercussion, the Department of Justice announced on Friday.

"A Peruvian national has been sentenced to 90 months in prison for operating a series of call centers in Peru that defrauded Spanish-speaking US residents by falsely threatening them with arrest, deportation and other legal consequences," the department said in a press release. Two additional Peruvian co-conspirators pleaded guilty and two others were extradited to the Southern District of Florida to face prosecution for their roles in the scheme, the Justice Department said.

"According to court documents, Omar Cuzcano Marroquin, 32, of Lima, Peru, was sentenced for conspiring to commit mail fraud and wire fraud through a series of Peruvian call centers that used false statements and threats to obtain money from Spanish-speaking individuals across the United States," the release said.

Cuzcano and others falsely told victims that they were required to accept and pay for English-language courses and other educational products and that failure to do so placed them in legal jeopardy, the department said.

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UN Chief Welcomes Pledge to Facilitate Aid Access in Call With Ethiopia's Prime Minister

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed Ethiopian authorities pledge to facilitate aid access, his spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Friday after Guterres' phone talks with nation's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed. "The Secretary-General welcomed the Prime Minister's assurances that the Government of Ethiopia will facilitate immediate access to Tigray for humanitarian organizations, as well as the Prime Minister's commitment that essential basic services, including power and communications, will resume swiftly," Dujarric said.

Guterres also acknowledged the government's pledge to use the ceasefire to facilitate urgent humanitarian assistance, including regular United Nations humanitarian flights into Tigray, he added.

UN chief also urged all parties to meet their obligations in protecting civilians and supporting international humanitarian law, Dujarric noted.

Clashes in the province of Tigray erupted in November after the Ethiopian government accused the local ruling party - the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) - of ambushing a regional army post to hijack weapons and arm anti-government militia. The Tigray region has been occupied by the Ethiopian military since then, resulting in fighting with the rebels.

An estimated 2 million of Tigray's 6 million people are reported to have fled their homes and an estimated 900,000 people likely face famine as a result of the occupation.

The TPLF represents a party that for dominated Ethiopia's government for three decades until Abiy, a member of the rival Oromo ethnic group, came to power in 2018.

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Biden's Call With Putin Lasted About One Hour – White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – The telephone call between US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier in the day lasted for about an hour, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The focus of the call and the conversation which I can tell you was about an hour long was really primarily on these two topics [recent ransomware attacks and the United Nations Syrian aid mechanism extension]," Psaki told reporters.

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Central Bank Digital Currencies Can Work, If They "Do No Harm" - IMF/ World Bank

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - Central banks may have lots of concerns in launching their own cryptocurrencies but such payment modes could actually benefit global development if the risks are minimized, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank said in a joint report to the G20 on Friday.

"CBDCs [Central Bank Digital Currencies] have the potential to enhance the efficiency of cross-border payments, as long as their design follows the 'Hippocratic Oath for CBDC design' and its premise to 'do no harm'," said the report.

Addressing the Group of 20 countries which began their meetings on Friday, the IMF and World Bank said coordination on digital currencies would shake up the status quo of having to rely on expensive and slow transfer services to send money around the world.

In that sense, a US-backed digital dollar, which the Federal Reserve was debating, would actually support global development, the two bodies on world funding and the economy said. "If coordinated successfully, the clean slate presented by CBDCs might – in time and in combination with other improvements – be leveraged to enhance cross-border payments," they said.

Still, it was up to each country to decide on the pros and cons of having their own central bank digital currency, the report said.

"Implications of CBDCs, even if only intended for domestic use, will go beyond borders, making it crucial to coordinate work and find common ground," it said.

The Federal Reserve is planning to publish a paper this summer on the possibility of issuing a digital dollar. The initiative comes after Randal Quarles, its vice chair for supervision, said in June that "developing a CBDC could pose considerable risks" and that the Federal Reserve might not issue its own cryptocurrency even if other central banks did.

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Last Week's Ransomware Attack Was Big Focus of Biden-Putin Call – White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – The ransomware attack on US Republican National Committee that took place last weekend was a big focus during the telephone call between the American President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier in the day, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"The ransomware attack that happened over the course of last weekend was a big focus of the call [between Biden and Putin]" Psaki told reporters.

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UPDATE: UNSC Unanimously Adopts Resolution Extending Syria's Cross-Border - President

UNITED NATIONS, July 9 (Sputnik) - UN Security Council on Friday unanimously adopted a resolution extending the cross-border aid delivery mechanism in northwest Syria for 12 months, Security Council President French Ambassador Nicolas de Riviere said following the vote.

"The result of the vote is as follows: the draft resolution received 15 votes in favor. The draft resolution is unanimously adopted," de Riviere said.

The resolution, drafted by the United States, Russia, Norway and Ireland, envisages the extension of the cross-border mechanism for up to 12 months.

The resolution "Decides to extend the decisions in paragraphs 2 and 3 of Security Council resolution 2165 (2014), for a period of six months, that is, until January 10 2022, only for the border crossing at Bab al-Hawa with an extension of an additional six months, that is, until July 10 2022, subject to the issuance of the Secretary General's substantive report," the text of the document said.

The resolution also calls on all member states to address the needs of the Syrian people in light of the "profound" impact of the COVID-19.

Initially, the UN Security Council had before it two competing resolutions - a draft by Norway and Ireland seeking a one-year extension through two crossings from Turkey and Iraq and a Russian-sponsored text aiming to extend aid deliveries for six months only from Turkey.

Moscow argued that cross-border aid deliveries into Syria have become outdated and are being abused by terrorist groups in the northwest. In addition, Russia has been seeking to expand cross-line aid deliveries from within the country that can be directly overseen by Damascus.

The new compromised draft, which had been on the table for 11 hours, is the first resolution on the matter co-authored by the US and Russia.

In particular, it "Requests the Secretary-General to brief the Council monthly and to provide a report on a regular basis, at least every 60 days, [and] to include in his reports overall trends in United Nations cross-line operations."

UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said Guterres welcomed the decision to extend the UN cross-border mechanism, adding that the world body continues to facilitate cross-line convoys, "critical" to respond to the needs of over 3.4 million people in northwestern Syria.

Authorized by the council in 2014, the cross-border mechanism initially allowed the United Nations and humanitarian partners to bring aid to Syria through four border crossings: two from Turkey, Iraq, and Jordan.

Last July, the Security Council adopted another resolution that authorized aid deliveries using one crossing point - Bab Al-Hawa from Turkey for a year.

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Biden, Merkel to Discuss Nord Stream 2 Next Week - Psaki

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden plans to discuss with German Chancellor Angela Merkel next week Russia's Nord Stream 2 gas-exporting pipeline which he continues to view as a bad deal, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

"It certainly will be part of the discussion, and the President's, our view continues to be that it is a bad deal and one that has global issues involved in it. But I am not going to predict for you what the outcome of the meeting will look like," Psaki said during a press briefing. Merkel is expected to visit the United States next Thursday for a meeting with Biden.

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US Has No New Information That Russian Gov't Directed Ransomware Attacks - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration does not have new information indicating the Russian government directed the latest ransomware attack against the United States, White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday.

"We don't have additional or new information suggesting the Russian government directed these attacks," Psaki said during a press briefing.

Psaki added said President Joe Biden during his call with Russian President Vladimir Putin earlier in the day urged Moscow to crack down on cybercriminal groups operating in Russia. The US president said the United States reserves the right to take any necessary action to defend its interests vulnerable to these cyberattacks, Psaki added.

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US Citizens Arrested for Murder of Haitian President Speak of Mastermind 'Mike' - Reports
WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The two Americans arrested in Haiti in connection with the murder of President Jovenel Moise say that they only worked as translators for the hit squad on behalf of the plot's mastermind named Mike, the New York Times reported on Friday, citing a Haitian judge in the investigation.

The two men were identified as James J. Solages, a former security guard at the Canadian Embassy in Haiti, and Joseph Vincent. Both men were Haitian-born US citizens.

Vincent would only say that the mastermind of the broader plot was a foreigner named 'Mike' who spoke both Spanish and English. Solages said that he had found the job to translate for the hit squad in a listing posted online, but would not say how much they had been paid, the New York Times said.

Vincent and Solages have also insisted that the plan, as they understood it, was not to kill Moise. Rather, they said that the mercenaries' goal was to arrest him under the warrant of an investigating magistrate.

President Moise and his wife were shot at their private residence early Wednesday morning. No motive for the assassination is currently known, although most of the detained suspects are Colombian. The White House announced on Friday that it will be sending senior FBI and DHS officials to help probe Moise's assassination.

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Biden to Meet With German Chancellor Merkel on Thursday – White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – US President Joe Biden will welcome the German Chancellor Angela Merkel in the White House on Thursday to discuss issues of mutual concern, including the shared global challenges, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said on Friday. "On Thursday, the [US] President [Biden] will welcome German Chancellor Angela Merkel to the White House for an official working visit. Her visit will affirm the deep and enduring bilateral ties between the United States and Germany. This forward-looking visit will address our robust partnership on shared global challenges and identify areas to further strengthen cooperation in the months and years ahead," Psaki told reporters at a briefing.

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Biden, Putin in Call Discuss Cyber Attacks, UN Syrian Aid Mechanism - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden and Russian President Vladimir Putin in a recent telephone call discussed the ongoing ransomware attack in the United States and the UN Syrian aid mechanism extension that was adopted earlier in the day, the White House said on Friday.

"The leaders commended the joint work of their respective teams following the U.S.-Russia Summit that led to the unanimous renewal of cross-border humanitarian assistance to Syria today in the UN Security Council," the White House said in a press release. "President Biden also spoke with President Putin about the ongoing ransomware attacks by criminals based in Russia that have impacted the United States and other countries around the world."

Russia has repeatedly denied any role in the latest cyber attacks against the United States. Biden underscored the need for Russia to take action to crack down on cyber criminal groups operating in Russia, the release said.

The US president told Putin the United States will take action to defend its critical infrastructure from cyberattacks if necessary, the release said.

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FBI, DHS Officials to Be Sent to Haiti in Response to Gov't Request for Aid- Psaki

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The United States dispatches senior law enforcement officials to Haiti following the assassination of the country's leader, the White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki told reporters on Friday.

"In response to the Haitian government's request for security and investigative assistance we will be sending senior FBI and DHS officials to Port-au-Prince as soon as possible to assess the situation and how we may be able to assist," Psaki said during a daily briefing.

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Guterres Welcomes UNSC Decision to Extend UN Mechanism for Syria Aid - Spokesman

UNITED NATIONS, July 9 (Sputnik) - UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed the UN Security Council's adoption of the resolution reauthorizing cross-border aid deliveries into northwestern Syrian through the crossing from Turkey, UN spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said in a statement on Friday.

The resolution, drafted by Russia, the United States, Norway and Ireland, was adopted unanimously, allowing cross-border aid to flow into Syria for six months, with a possible extension until July 10, 2022.

"The Secretary-General welcomes the Security Council's decision to extend the UN cross-border mechanism in northwest Syria via the Bab al-Hawa border crossing," Dujarric said. "Cross-border humanitarian assistance remains a lifeline for millions of people in the area and beyond."

The spokesman pointed out that needs continue to outgrow the response in Syria, and Guterres has stressed to the Council that additional crossings could do more to help the United Nations assist over 3.4 million people in need.

Dujarric also added the United Nations continues to try to increase cross-line deliveries from within the country.

"The UN continues to engage with all parties to also facilitate cross-line convoys. They are critical for the expansion of the overall response as humanitarian needs continue to grow," Dujarric said.

He further reiterated Guterres's call on all parties in Syria to ensure humanitarian access to all people in need under international law.

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Biden Held Phone Call With Putin on Friday - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden held a telephone call with Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday, the White House said.

"President Biden spoke today with President Putin," the White House said in a press release.
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Northrop Grumman to Build \$935Mln HALO Astronaut Module For Moon Orbit Station – NASA
WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – US defense contractor Northrop Grumman has finalized negotiations to construct the astronauts' living quarters for the Gateway Moon-orbiting space station as part of the Artemis program, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) announced on Friday.

"NASA and Northrop Grumman of Dulles, Virginia, have finalized a contract to develop the Habitation and Logistics Outpost (HALO) for Gateway, which will be a critical way station and outpost in orbit around the Moon as part of NASA's Artemis program, NASA said in a press release.

The firm, fixed-price contract is valued at \$935 million and under it, Northrop Grumman will be responsible for attaching and testing the integrated HALO with the Power and Propulsion Element (PPE), being built by Maxar Technologies, the space agency explained.

"Northrop Grumman will also lead the integrated PPE and HALO spacecraft turnover and launch preparation with SpaceX, and support activation and checkout of HALO during the flight to lunar orbit. NASA is targeting November 2024 to launch the integrated spacecraft on a SpaceX Falcon Heavy rocket," NASA said.

HALO is where astronauts will live and conduct research while visiting the Gateway and its pressurized living quarters will provide command and control systems for the lunar outpost and docking ports for visiting spacecraft, such as NASA's Orion spacecraft and lunar landers, the space agency said.

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Ex-Russian Military Contractor Executive Sentenced to 5 Years in US Prison, Sputnik Learns

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – A US court on Friday sentenced former deputy director of major Russian military contractor Voentorg, Leonid Teyf, to five years in prison, a court clerk told Sputnik.

“He was sentenced to 60 months,” the clerk said.

In March, Teyf, 59, pleaded guilty to bribery of a public official, visa fraud, and false statements on tax returns. He was sentenced to 60 months in prison on the first and second counts, and to 36 months on the third one.

“All such terms to be served concurrently, producing a total term of 60 months,” the court ruling said.

In a plea deal, Teyf and his wife also agreed to forfeit assets in the amount of \$5.9 million.

Prosecutors initially accused Teyf of running a kickback scheme through which he allegedly stole and laundered \$150 million from the Russian government starting in 2010 when then-Defense Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov granted Voentorg a contract to provide the military with goods and services.

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US Envoy Says UNSC Syria Resolution Adoption an Important Moment in Relations with Russia

UNITED NATIONS, July 9 (Sputnik) - Washington views the unanimous adoption of the UN Security Council resolution extending for up to 12 months cross-border humanitarian deliveries into northwestern Syria as an important moment in relations with Russia, US Ambassador to the United Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told reporters on Friday.

Earlier in the day, all the 15 member states of the Security Council voted in support of the resolution produced jointly by Russia, the United States, Norway and Ireland.

“I certainly see it is an important moment in our relationship, and it shows that what we can do with the Russians if we work with them diplomatically on common goals,” Thomas-Greenfield said. “And I look forward to looking for other opportunities to work with the Russians on issues of common interest to our two governments.”

Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia also described the adoption of the resolution as a turning point in US-Russia relations.

“We hope that it might be the turning point,... hopefully, broadly, that demonstrates that we can cooperate when there is a willingness,” Nebenzia said.

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Death Toll in Florida Building Collapse Rises to 78 - Mayor

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) — The death toll in the Surfside, Florida, condominium building collapse has reached 78 after authorities found another 10 bodies during the ongoing recovery operation, Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava told reporters on Friday.

"We have now uncovered additional 14 victims of this tragedy. This brings the total number of confirmed fatalities to 78," Levine Cava said during a press briefing.

Forty-seven victims have been identified, she added.

The mayor said 200 residents of the building have been accounted for and another 62 people potentially still unaccounted.

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In First, Russia, US Produce Joint Milestone Cross-Border Resolution - Nebenzia

UNITED NATIONS, July 9 (Sputnik) - Russia and the United States, for the first time, were able to introduce a joint resolution on Syria's cross-border assistance, and Moscow hopes this will become a turning point, Russian Permanent Representative to the United Nations Vassily Nebenzia said following the UN Security Council vote on Friday.

"We are satisfied that in spite of all the difficulties and problems, we managed to find an important point of convergence on such a complex issue as cross border mechanism to deliver humanitarian assistance in Syria," Nebenzia said after the resolution, sponsored by the United States, Russia, Norway and Ireland, was adopted unanimously.

"Today, we are witnessing a historic moment: for the first time, Russia and the United States not only managed to find an agreement but to present a joint text, which all our colleagues in the council supported. We expect that a similar kind of day would become a turning point not only for Syria but for the Middle Eastern region as a whole," Nebenzia said.

The adopted resolution authorizes the extension through Bab al-Hawa crossing from Turkey for six months, with a possible extension for additional six months until July 10, 2022, if a report by the UN Secretary-General recommends doing so.

"We expect to have detailed information on the provision of humanitarian assistance through the cross-border mechanism, and in particular the mechanism of the UN on distribution on the ground locations and storage of the humanitarian assistance delivered," Nebenzia added.

The adoption comes just a day before the expiration of the mechanism's mandate on July 10. The United Nations had previously stressed the cross-border mechanism of humanitarian deliveries into northwestern Syria had no alternatives to supply aid to all people in need in the region.

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Blinken, Pakistani Counterpart Discuss Cooperation on Afghan Peace Process - State Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi discussed the prospects of the two countries cooperating to support the peace process in Afghanistan, State Department spokesperson Ned Price said on Friday.

"Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken spoke today with Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi and underscored the shared desire for a stable and sustainable bilateral relationship," Price said in a statement. "The Secretary and the Foreign Minister discussed the importance of continued US-Pakistan cooperation on the Afghanistan peace process following the visit to the United States by Afghan President Ghani and Chairman Abdullah."

The Biden administration has been calling on Afghanistan's neighboring countries to play a bigger role in ensuring the stability of the war-torn country. US forces are expected to complete the withdrawal process by August 31.

Violence in Afghanistan has increased as Taliban forces fight to gain control of territory as US and NATO forces pull out.

Pentagon Press Secretary John Kirby confirmed this week that the Taliban have taken over dozens of district and provincial centers and are expected to threaten other provincial centers. On Thursday, President Joe Biden said he does not believe it is inevitable that the Afghan government will fall to the Taliban after the US leaves Afghanistan. The US president said he trusts Afghan security forces have the capacity to prevent a civil war, adding that the Afghan people must control their own fate.

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Ex-Deputy Head of Russian Military Contractor Sentenced to 5 Years in Jail – US Court

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – A US court on Friday sentenced former deputy director of major Russian military contractor Voentorg, Leonid Teyf, to five years in prison, a court clerk told Sputnik.

"He was sentenced to 60 months," the clerk said.

In March, Teyf, 59, pleaded guilty to bribery of a public official, visa fraud, and false statements on tax returns.

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US Long-Term Inflation Seen at Around 2% Despite Current Price Hype - Fed

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US inflation is expected to average 2 percent in the long run in tandem with the Federal Reserve's target despite higher price pressures in an economy rebounding rapidly from the coronavirus pandemic, the central bank said on Friday.

"After a period of temporarily higher inflation, recent readings on inflation expectations suggest that inflation will revert to levels compatible with the committee's 2 percent longer-run inflation goal," the Fed said in its Monetary Policy Report, which was separate from the monthly statements issued by its policy-making Federal Open Market Committee.

While near-term upside risks to its inflation forecast have increased, supply and demand should return to normal as extraordinary circumstances fade away, the central bank said.

"The pandemic-related wave of retirements will continue to impact labor force participation for some time" but ultimately "inflation is largely projected to fall", the Fed said.

Commodity-fueled inflation has become a hot-button issue in the United States since vaccine breakthroughs for the COVID-19 in November unleashed price rallies in most raw materials amid forecasts for rapid economic recovery from the pandemic. Constraints in supply chains seeing explosive demand after months of lax activity have added to the upward price pressure in most commodities.

The White House on Friday blamed the lack of competition in American industry as one reason for the current inflationary trends, saying few large competitors controlled the market in most industries, forcing price mark-ups as much as three times in prices of necessities such as prescription drugs, hearing aids and internet services.

President Joe Biden was to sign an executive order on Friday to launch 72 actions to boost competitiveness in US industry and curb inflation, the White House said.

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New CDC Guidance Prioritizes Return to In-Person Instruction in US Schools This Fall

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – The US Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) on Friday updated its COVID-19 guidance for schools that makes the return to in-person instruction starting this Fall a priority while emphasizing the need to rely on local data to implement appropriate prevention strategies.

"Students benefit from in-person learning, and safely returning to in-person instruction in the fall 2021 is a priority," the new guidance says. "[The guidance] updated to emphasize the need for localities to monitor community transmission, vaccination coverage, screening testing, and occurrence of COVID-19 outbreaks to guide decisions on the level of layered prevention strategies."

The new guidance continues to recommend maintaining at least 3 feet of distance between students inside classrooms as well as wearing masks indoors by those who are not fully vaccinated in order to reduce transmission risk.

The schools are advised to use other preventative strategies when it is not possible to maintain distance, including testing, ventilation, handwashing and respiratory etiquette.

The guidance update is published amid the recent CDC report according to which the prevalence of the more transmissible Delta variant of COVID-19 in the US has exceeded the 50% mark, with cases and hospitalizations increasing over the past week.

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UNSC Unanimously Adopts Resolution Extending Syria's Cross-Border - President

UNITED NATIONS, July 9 (Sputnik) - UN Security Council on Friday unanimously adopted a resolution extending the cross-border aid delivery mechanism in northwest Syria for 12 months, Security Council President French Ambassador Nicolas de Riviere said following the vote.

"The result of the vote is as follows: the draft resolution received 15 votes in favor. The draft resolution is unanimously adopted," de Riviere said.

The resolution, drafted by the United States, Russia, Norway and Ireland, envisages the extension of the cross-border mechanism for up to 12 months.

The resolution "Decides to extend the decisions in paragraphs 2 and 3 of Security Council resolution 2165 (2014), for a period of six months, that is, until 10 January 2022, only for the border crossing at Bab al-Hawa with an extension of an additional six months, that is, until 10 July 2022, subject to the issuance of the Secretary General's substantive report," the text of the document said.

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Canada Suspends Railways in Parts of British Columbia for 48 Hours Amid Raging Wildfires

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – The Canadian government is suspending railway operations in parts of the province of British Columbia amid raging wildfires throughout the province, Transport Canada said on Friday.

"Transport Canada is issuing a Ministerial Order in the interest of safe railway operations, and to protect public safety for the temporary return of residents to inspect their homes in Lytton, British Columbia," the statement said citing Transport Minister Omar Alghabra.

As part of the order, the Canadian National Railway (CN) and Canadian Pacific Railway (CP) will cease railway operations – except for emergency fire response, maintenance and repair work – between Kamloops and Boston Bar, BC in the province's interior for a period of 48 hours. Parts of British Columbia remain marred in an unprecedented heatwave, which set a Canadian temperature record in the several days since its onset and has spurred wildfires that have left charred remains of the village of Lytton, forcing a complete evacuation of its residents.

Lytton sits along the rail corridor impacted by the order.

The order took effect on 12:01 a.m. PDT (07:01 GMT).

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Nearly 60% of US Voters Believe Media 'Enemy of The People' – Poll

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) – Well over half of US voters now believe the nation's media are enemies of the American people, a Rasmussen poll released on Friday found.

"A new national telephone and online survey by Rasmussen Reports finds that 58% of likely US voters at least somewhat agree that the media are 'truly the enemy of the people,'" the organization announced.

More than half of that number, comprising 34 percent of all those polled, "strongly agree" that the American media are hostile to the interests of the public they claim to serve, Rasmussen Reports said.

"Voters overwhelmingly believe 'fake news' is a problem and a majority agrees with former President Donald Trump that the media have become 'the enemy of the people,'" the polling organization advised.

Only 36 percent of those polled did not agree that the media was the enemy of the people and just 23 percent "strongly" disagreed with the proposition, Rasmussen Reports said. The poll was conducted among 1,000 American adults nationwide on July 7-8 and come with a 95 percent likelihood of reliability, the company said.

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US to Halt Detention of Illegal Migrants Who Are Pregnant - Immigration Enforcement

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The Biden administration will cease the arrest and detention of illegal migrants who are pregnant, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) said on Friday.

The Trump administration had expanded ICE's authority to detain pregnant migrant women, including those seeking asylum.

"The policy...states that ICE should not detain, arrest or take into custody for an administrative violation of the immigration laws individuals known to be pregnant, postpartum or nursing, unless release is prohibited by law or exceptional circumstances exist," ICE said in a press release.

Migrant women with infants must be within a year of the postpartum period, the release noted. ICE said if the detention of pregnant migrants is necessary, the agency will provide appropriate medical care to the individuals.

According to the Government Accountability Office, ICE detained pregnant migrant women more than 4,600 times from 2016 to 2018, but most detentions lasted one week or less while 10 percent were detained for more than 30 days.

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Canada, Mexico to Hold Trade Summit in 'Next Little While' - Minister

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - Canada and Mexico will soon hold a bilateral trade summit, Minister of Small Business, Export Promotion and International Trade Mary Ng said on Friday. "Between [Mexico Economy Secretary Tatiana] Clouthier] and I, we agreed that we are going to hold a summit between Mexico and Canada on trade in the next little while," Ng said during a press briefing.

The two countries will work to establish a bi-lateral trade mission for women entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses, Ng also said.

Canada and Mexico were also able to mitigate some unspecified trade disputes, Ng added.

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Biden Launches War on Lack of Competition in American Industry - White House

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US President Joe Biden has launched a war against the lack of competition in American industry, rolling out 72 actions to mitigate the crisis which the White House said was accelerating inflation in an economy rebounding from the coronavirus pandemic.

"In over 75 percent of US industries, a smaller number of large companies now control more of the business than they did twenty years ago," the White House said in a statement, citing sectors such as healthcare, financial services and agriculture. "That lack of competition drives up prices for consumers."

The monopoly by few large players has led to tripling mark-ups in prices that force families to pay more for necessities such as prescription drugs, hearing aids and internet service, the White House said.

Barriers to competition were also driving down wages for workers, which have fallen by some 17 percent in some cases due to industry consolidation, it said.

"When there are only a few employers in town, workers have less opportunity to bargain for a higher wage and to demand dignity and respect in the workplace. Tens of millions of Americans—including those working in construction and retail—are required to sign non-compete agreements as a condition of getting a job, which makes it harder for them to switch to better-paying options," the White House said.

Higher prices and lower wages caused by lack of competition are now estimated to cost the median American household \$5,000 per year, it added.

The 72 initiatives which Biden will be signing into an executive order later on Friday will include a mandate for more than a dozen federal agencies to promptly tackle some of the most pressing competition problems across the economy, the White House said.

Among other things, they will make it easier for workers to change jobs and raise wages by banning or limiting non-compete agreements that currently affect some 36 to 60 million workers. Prescription drug prices will also be lowered through state and tribal programs that will import safe and cheaper drugs from Canada and hearing aids will be sold over the counter at drug stores,

Early termination fees on internet bills will be abolished, along with landlord exclusivity arrangements that stick tenants with only a single internet option.

Biden's executive order also calls on the Department of Justice and Federal Trade Commission to enforce the antitrust laws vigorously and recognize that the law allowed them to challenge prior anti-competitive mergers that past administrations did not previously challenge.

For broader effect, a White House Competition Council, led by the Director of the National Economic Council, will be formed to monitor progress on finalizing the initiatives in the executive order and to coordinate the federal government's response to the rising power of large corporations in the economy.

Commodity-fueled inflation has become a hot-button issue in the United States since vaccine breakthroughs for the COVID-19 in November unleashed price rallies for most raw materials amid forecasts for rapid economic recovery from the pandemic. Constraints in supply chains seeing explosive demand after months of lax activity have added to the upward price pressure in most commodities.

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US, UK Among 21 Countries Concerned With Press Freedom in Hong Kong - Statement

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - Twenty-one members of the Media Freedom Coalition, including the United States and the United Kingdom, have issued a joint statement on Friday to express their strong concern over the recent closure of the Apple Daily newspaper as well as the detainment of its staff by the Chinese authorities in Hong Kong.

"The undersigned members of the Media Freedom Coalition express their strong concerns about the forced closure of the Apple Daily newspaper, and the arrest of its staff by the Hong Kong authorities. The use of the National Security Law to suppress journalism is a serious and negative step, which undermines Hong Kong's high degree of autonomy and the rights and freedoms of people in Hong Kong, as provided for in the Hong Kong Basic Law and the Sino-British Joint Declaration," the statement said.

The signatories are also concerned by the prospects of a new legislation introduction that is allegedly intended to eliminate criticism of the government's policies.

In addition to the United States and the United Kingdom, the other countries that co-signed the statement are Australia, Austria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Iceland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Netherlands, New Zealand, Slovakia and Switzerland.

In June, Hong Kong police detained five executives of the Apple Daily newspaper - a vocal opponent of Beijing - over alleged violation of the recently-adopted national security law. Following the incident, US President Joe Biden called on China to release the detained executives and other members of the press that it recently arrested.

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UNICEF Concerned Violence After Moise's Murder May Challenge Humanitarian Work in Haiti

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - UNICEF, the UN Children's Emergency Fund, said on Friday it was worried that further violence in Haiti after the murder of late President Jovenel Moise could impact humanitarian work of its teams in the country.

"UNICEF is deeply concerned that further violence and insecurity following the assassination of Haiti's President could pose serious challenges to the humanitarian work of our teams on the ground and their ability to safely reach the most vulnerable children and families," the release said.

The Fund explained that while it has lifesaving supplies in Haiti, continued violence and instability could prevent the delivery and replenishment of stockpiles of essential items for children.

"UNICEF is alarmed by the dire humanitarian situation of children and families in Haiti, which has been rapidly deteriorating since the beginning of this year," the release said. "In the first three months of 2021 alone, the number of admissions of severely acute malnourished children in health facilities across Haiti has increased by 26 per cent compared to last year."

The UNICEF noted that some one-third of all children in Haiti urgently need emergency relief due to increasing gang violence, constrained access to clean water, as well as protection services in times of COVID-19.

"UNICEF is urging an end to gang violence in Haiti and calling for safe passage to reach affected families with humanitarian assistance in the most impacted areas of Port-au-Prince," it said. "For 2021, UNICEF is seeking US\$48.9 million to meet the humanitarian needs of 1.5 million people in Haiti including over 700,000 children, which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and gang violence. So far, this humanitarian appeal has remained largely underfunded, with only 31 per cent of the required funding available."

Moise was shot dead in his private residence on Wednesday morning, and his wife was injured in the attack. The Haitian police have reportedly identified 28 suspected murderers, most of them Colombian citizens. The Haitian law enforcement apprehended 17 suspects, including two Haitian-born US citizens, identified as James Solages and Joseph Vincent.

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Blinken Says Had Important Call With Kuwaiti Counterpart on COVID-19 Vaccine Distribution

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Friday he had an important telephone call with his Kuwaiti counterpart about joint efforts to distribute more coronavirus vaccines to the international community.

"Important call today with Kuwaiti Foreign Minister Al-Sabah about our strong bilateral relationship and joint efforts on COVAX to distribute more COVID-19 vaccines worldwide," Blinken said via Twitter.

Earlier this month, Saudi Arabia notified the international community that it was prepared to become a regional hub for the production of COVID-19 vaccines to distribute among surrounding communities.

State Department spokesperson Ned Price in a separate statement said Blinken and his counterpart also discussed regional security and other issues of mutual interest.

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Huge Majority of US Voters Approve Full Pullout From Afghanistan - Poll

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - Almost three quarters of all US voters support President Joe Biden's moves to fully withdraw US combat forces from Afghanistan by the end of August, a new Hill-HarrisX poll reported on Friday.

In all, 73 percent of registered voters in the sample examined on July 2 and July 3 backed the evacuation after almost 20 years of US military operations in the Central Asian nation, The Hill reported.

The figure showed the same high levels of support for the policy as an earlier Hill-HarrisX poll conducted in April, the pollsters said.

Some 32 percent of those in favor of the pullout "strongly" supported Biden's policy while the remaining 42 percent said they "somewhat" backed it, Hill-HarrisX said.

Only 27 percent of poll responders, just over one in four, opposed the withdrawal and a mere 7 percent "strongly" opposed it, the pollsters said.

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Canadian Economy Adds 231,000 Jobs in June, Recouping Some of Spring Losses - Data

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The Canadian economy gained 231,000 jobs in June, recouping some of the 275,000 jobs lost over the previous two months, the state statistics agency said on Friday.

"Employment rose by 231,000 (+1.2%) in June, following a cumulative decline of 275,000 over the previous two months," Statistics Canada said in its monthly Labor Force Survey.

The unemployment rate fell by 0.4 percent to 7.8 percent, Statistics Canada said.

The employment increase was led by part-time work - 264,000 part-time positions were added by the Canadian economy - primarily, in the accommodation and food services, and retail trade sectors, Statistics Canada said.

However, full-time employment declined by 33,000, the number of self-employed workers fell by 63,000 and the employment rate remains 1.7 below pre-pandemic levels.

Friday's job report points to the government of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau missing its target to restore pre-pandemic employment levels by June, Pierre Poilievre, the official opposition Conservative Party's jobs and industry critic, noted in a statement via Twitter.

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US Blacklists 34 Entities, Including 23 From China, 6 from Russia - Commerce Dept.

WASHINGTON, July 9 (Sputnik) - The US blacklisted 34 foreign entities, including 23 from China in connection to the situation in Xinjiang and six from Russia for procurement of military electronic components, according to the Commerce Department ruling to be published on Monday.

"The Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security (BIS) added 34 entities to the Entity List for their involvement in, or risk of becoming involved in, activities contrary to the foreign policy and national security interests of the United States," a statement from the department read.

Most Chinese companies added to the economic blacklist "have been implicated in human rights violations and abuses in the implementation of China's campaign of repression, mass detention, and high-technology surveillance against Uyghurs, Kazakhs, and other members of Muslim minority groups in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region," according to the ruling. China routinely denies any wrongdoing.

The Russian entities found themselves on the list due to their alleged involvement in the procurement of US-made electronic components which are deemed by Washington as capable of advancing Russian military programs, according to the document.

The Commerce Department blacklisted three Russian companies, OOO Teson, OOO Trade-Component, and Radiant Group of Companies, along with three individuals, Andrey Kuznetsov, Dmitry Kravchenko, and Margarita Kuznetsova.

Other additions to the blacklist include entities from Canada, Iran, Lebanon, Netherlands, Pakistan, Singapore, South Korea, Taiwan, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and the United Kingdom.

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Chinese companies have been blacklisted for their alleged connection to the human rights violations against Uyghurs in the Xinjiang region. The Russian entities found themselves on the list due to their alleged involvement in the procurement of US-made electronic components which are deemed by Washington as capable of advancing Russian military programs, according to the document.

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UN Rights Expert Urges to Classify Israeli Settlements As War Crimes

UNITED NATIONS, July 9 (Sputnik) - UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian Territory Michael Lynk on Friday called on the international community to designate Israeli settlements as war crimes.

"It is a tragic paradox that, while the Israeli settlements are clearly prohibited by international law, the international community has been remarkably reluctant to enforce its own laws," Lynk said in a statement.

He said the Israeli settlements violate the prohibition against the transfer by an occupying power of parts of civilian population into an occupied territory, designated as a war crime under the Rome Statute.